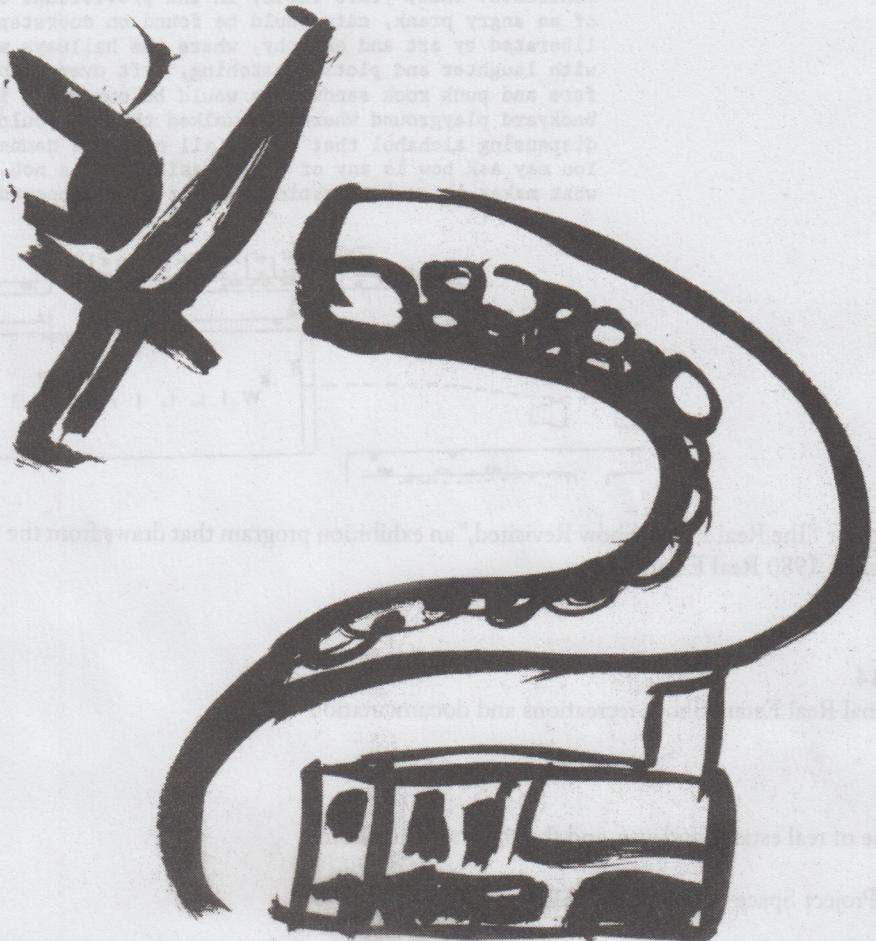


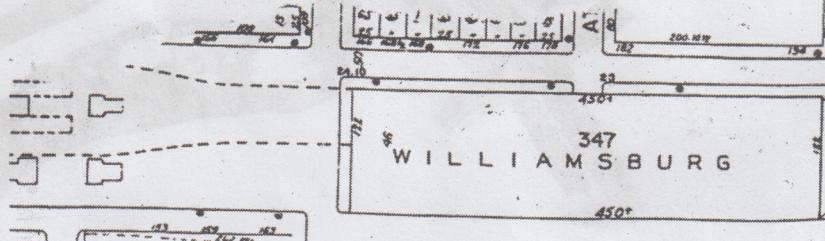
# "Imagine..."



**A SPECIAL ISSUE OF THE HOUSE MAGIC REVIEW FOR  
"THE REAL ESTATE SHOW REVISITED"**

**{APRIL 2014}**

Imagine walking down Delancey street one night. A winter night. You walk past tenement buildings crouching like Easter Island statues pistol whipped by bulldozers. The wind is slamming into the buildings like hurled plates which shatter from the cold. There's romance in the air. You are carrying a battered guitar case with a pair of bolt cutters inside (what were you thinking?) Who the hell could possibly foretell that your actions tonight would lead, later, to you playing air saxaphone holding a cardboard cutout of same while miming in sync to a cassette tape track of no-wave music in front of a bunch of rum drunk cynical arty types who just happened to be killing time while waiting for their generational Godots to get the fuck out of the scene; for overdoses and cirrhosis of the liver- for something anything to take away the sting of unarticulated New Years angst? Who could foretell that the cutting of a padlock on the door of an abandoned showroom would unlock a chain of events more absurd than any Dada manifesto? That, years later, in the provisional 'space' born of an angry prank, cats would be found on doorsteps liberated by art and anarchy, where the hallways would echo with laughter and plots unhatching, left over soup kitchen fare and punk rock sandwiches would be composted in poverty's backyard playground where one walked through sculptures dispensing alchahol that leaked all over the damned place? You may ask how is any of this possible? It's not. That's what makes it so interesting. Here's what happened.



This booklet is prepared for "The Real Estate Show Revisited," an exhibition program that draws from the themes addressed in the artists' group Colab's 1980 Real Estate Show

James Fuentes Gallery  
55 Delancey Street  
April 4 – April 27, 2014  
artwork from the original Real Estate Show, recreations and documentation

ABC No Rio  
April 9 – May 8  
new work on the theme of real estate, land-use, and the right to a safe home.

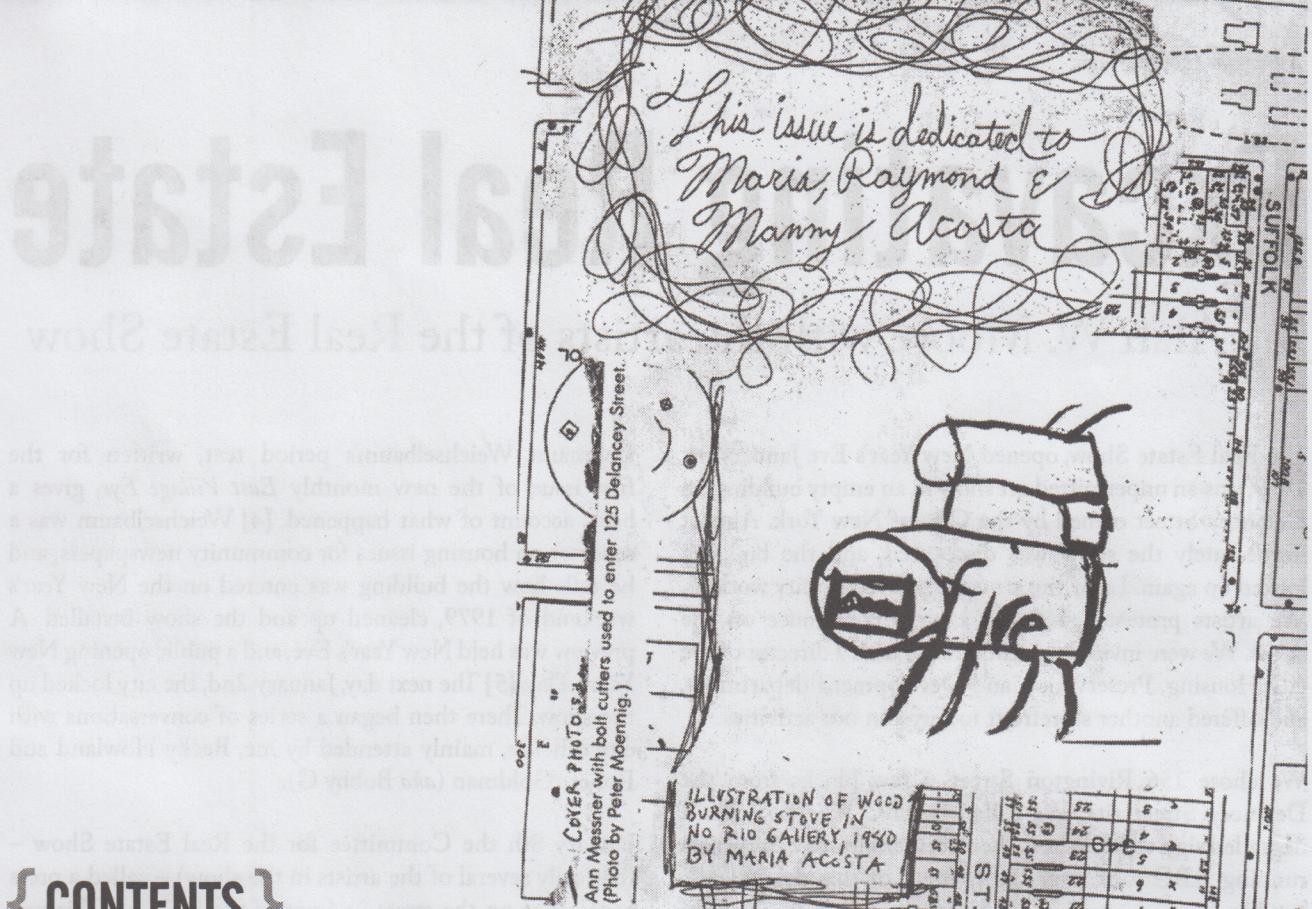
Cuchifritos Gallery + Project Space of the Artists Alliance  
April 19 – May 18  
new work questioning the looming changes in the neighborhood dominated by SPURA development, presented as part of Lower East Side History Month

This is a supplement of the House Magic zine project, an irregular review of squatting and occupation culture  
it is printed with private funds, and supported by your contribution

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issues #1-5 are available as PDFs at <https://sites.google.com/site/housemagicbfc/>  
and in zine form from SQ Distro, Pittsburgh, PA



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COVER ▷ Becky Howland, One Tentacle, 123 Delancey Street, © 1979

This and facing page: Inside front cover and first page of the zine *ABC No Rio: Founders Era Artifacts* prepared by Okra P. Dingle and Vikki Law for the ABC No Rio installation at "Urban Encounters," 1998 at the New Museum

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BACK COVER ▷ text: Manifesto of the Real Estate Show; image: Becky Howland, poster for the Real Estate Show

# Excavating Real Estate

by Alan W. Moore with the artists of the Real Estate Show

The Real Estate Show, opened New Year's Eve January 31, 1979, was an unpermitted art show in an empty building on Delancey Street owned by the City of New York. Almost immediately the show was discovered, and the building locked up again. Later the art was removed by city workers. We artists protested, holding a press conference on the street. We were invited to a conference with a director of the city Housing, Preservation and Development department, and offered another storefront to carry on our activities.

We chose 156 Rivington Street, a few blocks from the Delancey Street site. We called it ABC No Rio, after a degraded sign visible across the street. Eventually, the artists running ABC took over the entirety of this delapidated, trouble-plagued city-owned building. After 30 years of occupancy and management, they were given title in 2006. At this writing, funded plans are underway for construction of a new building on the site.

We have known for a long while that what makes this show significant was not its content, but its circumstances and its outcome – the establishment of the long-running cultural center ABC No Rio. ABC No Rio is different from most cultural centers in that it is explicitly dedicated to the “culture of resistance.” It is a place that embraces both autonomous political activism and creative experiment. This dedication follows from the founding act of the center, which was a politically framed occupation. This text is about how the Real Estate Show was conceived, planned and executed.

The immediate antecedent circumstances of the Real Estate Show – the projects of the artists’ organization Colab (1978-1989), have recently received some attention. [Note 1] Even as these historical operations began, the Occupy movement of 2011 brought the question of occupation for political purposes into mainstream view.

First, I need to explain what happened. My own remembrances of those few days of the actual show and its closure have been largely obscured by the intervening years – work in the neighborhood at ABC No Rio and after, and by many recapitulations [2] for diverse audiences. For this essay I asked my compatriot artists to recollect with me, in an attempt to reconstruct some of the organizing that went into making this show. Their recollections are scattered throughout this text. [3]

Lehmann Weichselbaum’s period text, written for the first issue of the new monthly *East Village Eye*, gives a basic account of what happened. [4] Weichselbaum was a reporter on housing issues for community newspapers, and he tells how the building was entered on the New Year’s weekend of 1979, cleaned up and the show installed. A preview was held New Year’s Eve, and a public opening New Year’s Day. [5] The next day, January 2nd, the city locked up the show. There then began a series of conversations with city officials, mainly attended by me, Becky Howland and Robert Goldman (*aka* Bobby G).

January 8th the Committee for the Real Estate Show – (basically several of the artists in the show) – called a press conference on the street in front of the building. This was attended by reporters for the *New York Times*, *Soho Weekly News*, *East Village Eye*, and *Village Voice*. On January 11th the city removed the art show, which they then held “hostage” – as Becky Howland’s sign posted on the building’s side door declared.

During our talks with the city, Bobby G took the more aggressive tone with the officials, and Becky was coolly reasonable. These conferences invariably began with a phone call early in the morning of the day the meeting was to be scheduled, waking us up. I remember very little of these. Mainly, I remember that during the first face-to-face talk after our sidewalk press conference, we entered the offices of the NYC Housing, Preservation & Development agency carrying a page five *New York Times* article about our project. [6] Joseph Beuys had attended our press conference, accompanied by his art dealer Ronald Feldman, and a small entourage. Beuys was in town for events connected with his retrospective exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum. During the press conference, the “reigning field marshal of the fine art of radical politics” [7] had signed our petition and urged us to reoccupy the building. A couple of people tried it, but were quickly grabbed by police and put back onto the street. Later that day, Becky climbed up to the second story ledge, and pasted a giant octopus on the front of the building. John Halpern, who had staged another short-lived occupation with friends in a vacant lot on Spring Street also painted on the building.

After a while the city agreed to let us recover the artwork they had seized. Joseph Nechvatal went to the warehouse and

picked them up. He also photographed the artworks destroyed in the removal process. The city gave us a list of *in rem* properties which they owned, from which we were to choose a new permanent location. In the meantime, we were relocated to a tiny storefront alongside the Williamsburg Bridge.

The building we had entered, and which we could not continue to use was at 125 Delancey Street near the Williamsburg Bridge which joins the Lower East Side to Brooklyn. It was a pale blue stuccoed storefront with plate glass windows close to an underground subway entrance. It was the kind of well-trafficked boulevard space artists are rarely allowed to exhibit in, much less to use autonomously. We were first relocated to a tiny storefront tucked alongside the bridge, at 172 Delancey. In this almost entirely Puerto



125 Delancey Street in 1979 (photo by Alan Moore)

Rican and Dominican neighborhood, we were visited by some residents who later became involved with our project. We toured many city-owned buildings, and at last we settled on 156 Rivington Street, some three blocks from the original Real Estate Show site as a permanent location. We called the place "ABC No Rio" after a deteriorated sign visible across the street ("abogado notario," a former Spanish-speaking legal services office). Becky was given a letter of "permission to use" as an artist's studio with related activities – no lease.

Finally, this is why the Real Estate Show has mattered – less for itself, but because the most important outcome of the show was the establishment and continuation of ABC No Rio as an artist-run exhibiting institution. The current administration is in full possession of the premises, achieved at the end of a long bitter battle between Lower East Side squatters and different city administrations. [8] At this writing, ABC No Rio is in the end stages of its capital campaign, and straining to begin a construction process to replace its worn-out tenement with a new "green" edifice.

That's the basic story. Now let's back up and ask, How did this whole thing happen?

The Real Estate Show was conceived as one in a series of shows organized by the artists' group Colab. Thus it was a part of an unusual movement of self-organization among artists in New York City which had been active for two years with a certain amount of public notice.

Colab began in 1977 as a kind of informal meeting, open to all. Friends of friends came around, and the talk among some 40-odd people rolled along as an exciting open-ended conversation among artists. A decision was made to formalize the group and apply for grant money. This was relatively available to artists' groups at the time, from the state (New York State Council on the Arts, NYSCA), and the federal government (National Endowment for the Arts, NEA). This was the funding that had supported the growth of the non-profit network of exhibiting institutions called alternative spaces. [9] Colab deliberately set out to capture some of that funding for a group of artists intent upon working without the overhead of a permanent space with professional managers.

Very rapidly the group acquired a resume. Some in the group published the modest *X Motion Picture Magazine* in 1977, then the project was collectivized in 1978 for two more issues. A benefit concert of No Wave musicians raised the cash to print it. [10] Also in 1977, a film and video program was taken to the newly accessible public access cable television station, called "All Color News." This was followed by other television series, "Nightwatch" (1978-1979) and "Red Curtain" (1978) programmed by filmmakers, and the more eclectic and longer-lived Potato Wolf live television series (1978-84). In 1978, Colab had received funding from the NEA. The group bought an expensive 3/4" video editing system. After preparing "quickie" feature films with this equipment, Eric Mitchell and friends opened the New Cinema screening room in a storefront on heavily trafficked St. Marks Place in 1979. [11]

Concurrent with this intensive media production, a series of exhibitions were held in the personal loft spaces rented by some Colab artists. Most of these were open to all artists who wished to exhibit. [12] All were rough-edged and formally innovative, and several had a strongly political flavor.

In 1978, Stefan Eins, an Austrian sculptor who had hosted artists' exhibitions for years in his Soho storefront studio, relocated to the South Bronx and opened another storefront he called Fashion Moda. Eins was soon joined by Joe Lewis, who became co-director. Eins had exhibited a number of the Colab artists in his 3 Mercer Street studio in Soho during the mid-1970s, and some of them came to work at Fashion Moda.

This extraordinary burst of self-organized activity among a very diverse group of artists reflected a degree of collectivity uncharacteristic of the New York artworld, although it continued the spirit of collective work that had animated Soho in the late 1960s and early 1970s. [13]



Christof Kohlhöfer, Miami Riots, paint on paper

Artists had lived there illegally for years in lofts intended for manufacturing purposes. They organized and lobbied the city for legal tenancy. When their situations were finally legalized, real estate values in Soho took off. By the late 1970s, larger lofts were approaching the million dollar range.

The Real Estate Show was opened January 1<sup>st</sup>, and ABC No Rio in February. Only a few months later, in June of 1980, Colab produced the Times Square Show, an epochal event which made the cover of the *Village Voice* and garnered feature articles in the *Art in America* and *Artforum*. The show drew work and artists from both Fashion Moda and ABC No Rio. A recent text hints at the impact of the show, and the formal aesthetic that animated Colab projects: "A diverse collective of artists invade a former massage parlor in the most notorious neighborhood in New York City. Within its grimy, crumbling walls, hundreds of paintings, sculptures, Xeroxes, drawings, graffiti, and performances rub up against each other, losing individual definition to the point where it becomes difficult to tell where one piece begins and another ends." [14]

The most politically inflected of the early Colab exhibitions took place at the studio of Coleen Fitzgibbon, one of the founding members of the group, in her storefront at 5 Bleecker Street near the Bowery. These included the Income & Wealth Show (January–February, 1979) and the Manifesto Show (co-organized with Jenny Holzer in May 1979). Coleen worked closely with Robin Winters; they performed together as X & Y. Most of the other early Colab shows mostly took place at Winters' studio loft on Broadway.

In a recent reflection on the Colab experience, Coleen wrote: "It was the best of times and the worst of times... idealism swallowing a bitter pill in a culture of extreme loss and excess. What possible chance of survival does a non-hierarchical socialistic artist group have in the land of Lobster Landlordism, a pyramidal corporate feudal thinknot where all is profit and none is in control?" [15]

Coleen had also studied the Trilateral Commission plans for the neighborhood. This high level group, commissioned by the Rockefeller Foundation, wrote an influential report recommending the total destruction of the barrio, and the replacement of the old tenement buildings by high rise Corbusier-style edifices. The way to achieve this destruction, it seems, was by allowing "market forces" to do it. These forces included "redlining," a system whereby banks denied loans to anyone trying to start businesses or improve properties in the zone. In fact nearly all the banks had closed their offices in both the Lower East Side and East Village (east of Avenue A); they did not reopen until sometime after 2001. The progressive legal achievement of rent control, while it benefitted tenants, made buildings less profitable than other investments. A great many landlords – absentee investors or corporations – deliberately destroyed their buildings through arson fires in order to recoup insurance money. These burned buildings would then sat empty until the weather destroyed their structures and they had to be pulled down.

It is common for young artists in New York to work as assistants for other artists, and Coleen had worked for Gordon Matta-Clark. I knew Matta-Clark as an important artist in the Soho scene, and I had written about his work in *Artforum* during my first years in New York. (He didn't like my formalist review.) Gordon Matta-Clark had already made extensive use of the strategy of entering vacant, abandoned, apparently owner-less properties for purposes of making art. These were distributed throughout New York City in the 1970s, as they are today in many cities of the U.S. east coast and midwest. Working with the abandoned spaces of the contemporary city, Matta-Clark made art by cutting out or through parts of these buildings, creating new shapes and spaces. (His work survives today almost entirely in photographs.) Although he had worked in abandoned tenements in the South Bronx years before Fashion Moda was established, Matta-Clark was most interested in the abandoned piers on the west side of Manhattan. These piers, which serviced the great passenger ocean liners in the past, were visible from the also derelict west side highway. Matta-Clark made a spectacular artwork in one of these called *Day's End* (1975), entering a pier without permission and carving great chunks out of the walls to let in the daylight. Before his untimely death in 1978, Matta-Clark planned to work on the Lower East Side to establish an ecology center. [16]

Coleen also worked with Jack Smith, the extravagantly eccentric underground filmmaker who lived on the Lower East Side. (Her reference above to "Lobster Landlordism" is a phrase of Smith's.) She made a short film in 1976 called "LES" showing the devastated landscape of abandonment in the Lower East Side, including views of the West Side Highway and the abandoned piers. The narrator, Robin Winters, read a text about a fictional "island of Manhattma," whose inhabitants worshiped a god of money and material goods, "John Doe."

Peter Fend, another member of the Colab group also worked for Matta-Clark. Fend participated in the Real Estate Show in 1979-80, and presented a plan to replace the Con Ed power company monopoly with a community-generated project of sea algae composting generating methane gas. It was one of the first "mega-proposals" Fend has made throughout his career. This proposal was utopian, of course, but doubtless inspired by other utopian ventures in the Lower East Side.

In thinking about the project of an occupation, I discussed it first with Coleen and Robin. They both said they wanted nothing to do with it. For them, it was a dangerous idea. I was disappointed, since I felt we had all worked together to build a radical political context for Colab projects.

In the end, both artists did participate. As the Real Estate Show was being installed, both Coleen and Robin suddenly appeared and put up their artworks in the windows of the 125 Delancey Street building. We had covered the storefront windows with "Glass Wax," a glass cleaning product that produces an opaque white film on a window which is later wiped off together with the dirt. The covering obscured our activities as we installed the exhibition within the space. Robin and Coleen scraped out squares within the field of Glass Wax to paste their artworks onto the window. They didn't talk to anyone, although the show installation was a busy social scene. They just came in, put up their work, and left.

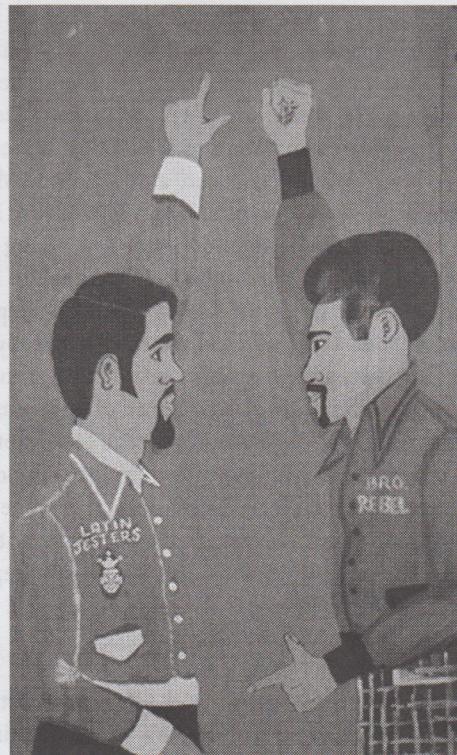
Why did they participate in such a peremptory, asocial manner, playing the role of guerrilleros carrying out some kind of raid?

The commando style of X & Y's participation in the Real Estate Show was consistent with a strain of infatuation with criminality in Colab circles during the 1970s, particularly terrorism. This engagement, part-lumpen, part-political, formed an intoxicating corrupted mix of performative aesthetics. This bizarre practice combined post-realist documentary filmmaking, post-structural theory, opportunism, and social conscience.

The "All Color News" cable television program Colab members worked on in 1978 included a number of features on political and social violence, most notably Beth and Scott B's interview with the chief of the New York City Police

department's arson and explosives squad. [17] He spoke to them about the January 1975 bombing of the Fraunces Tavern restaurant and museum in the financial district claimed by the FALN (Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional), which continued "unsolved," i.e., with no arrests. Virge Piersol made a small feature on the 1920 Wall Street bombing. [18]

Like many in our circle, I was fascinated with the recent radical actions of the German and Italian armed ultra-left groups, the Red Army Faction and Red Brigades. But I probably knew more about the global context. I was reading *Open Road*, a Canadian anarchist magazine, which chronicled North American direct actions. As a freelance typesetter, I worked for the independent socialist weekly *Guardian*, continuously processing news of socialist countries and international left resistance movements. Another of my employers, Myrna Zimmerman, shared an office with filmmaker Emile De Antonio, who had recently produced *Underground* (1976), a filmic record of a discussion with members of the Weather Underground revolutionary group. Myrna listened continuously to the Pacifica station WBAI, so I absorbed a continual diet of left news and information, almost none of which was reported in mainstream media. Myrna's office was essential to the production of two issues of *X Magazine*, since I was able to set the type and make the photostats there. At the time, graphic production was expensive.



Anonymous painting found in a former methadone clinic, 1979

The German and Italian armed ultra-left groups, the Red Army Faction and Red Brigades, were called “terrorist” in the U.S. media despite that these groups did not do indiscriminate bombings of civilians. [19] They targeted corporate and political leaders and the police protecting them. When “terrorism” was discussed in the U.S. media, there was never any account of why the RAF and Brigate Rossi were doing what they were doing, of what in fact were their aims, political contexts, or demands. I undertook a research on this, assisted by Robert Cooney, an Australian anarchist artist. (Robert also showed a series of political posters at 5 Bleecker Street.) We found almost no information available in English. We did discover that the Nazis in Germany had



John Ahearn, Stefan Eins (center) and William Scott during the Real Estate Show opening (Photo by Christof Kohlhöfer)

used the label “terrorist” to characterize their socialist and communist enemies, following many of the same media strategies we were seeing in the U.S. press. Finally, we exhibited the research materials at 5 Bleecker Street as the “Terrorist News Annual.” Coleen and Michael McClard and I entered the *Guardian* offices at night to film in their extensive collection of news photographs, selecting images from 20 years of terrorist bombings of civilians to make a film I showed with the same title. I intended to produce a publication, but the technical process I employed did not work. The ostensible magazine production turned into a kind of static film show. Using some of this material, I made the cover of *X Magazine* #3, which (does not) show a picture of kidnapped Italian prime minister Aldo Moro almost entirely covered by a brick wall. The spine of the issue showed various U.S. experts on terrorism with their comments. The magazine included an artistic reportage on the trial of RAF member Holger Meins and altered Lufthansa advertisements by Diego Cortez.

Colab artists’ interest in crime and ultraleft direct action was fortified by theoretical currents unleashed in New York during the later 1970s by post-structural continental theorists and leading avant-garde artists, [20] in a flood of new ideas which may be said to have begun with the epochal

“Schizo-Culture” conference at Columbia University in 1975, organized by Sylvère Lotringer and the *Semiotext(e)* magazine group. (I attended the session with Michel Foucault, although he spoke in French; thereafter I read his works and others by conference attendees Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as they appeared in translation.) From then on, the New York artworld began a kind of intense, albeit ragged engagement with post-structuralist theory.

Michael Goddard writes of the effects of the “Schizo Culture” conference in 1975, that it fell into the “ecology” of New York, “transplanting theory from the French academy into the fertile soil of New York political and artistic milieus at a moment when the latter were in a maximum degree of disarray as a variety of radical aesthetic and political projects ranging from happenings to armed guerrilla struggle were falling apart without any new paradigm to replace them, while at the same time shocking revelations about the level of state and secret services involvement in the surveillance and even elimination of those involved in radical politics had recently emerged in the form of the Cointelpro files.” The conference, mixing radicals and French-speaking academics Michel Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari with Ti-Grace Atkinson and R.D. Laing, was chaotic in academic terms, but, Goddard continues, it was “the sign of the intimate ‘disjunctive synthesis’ of theory with political and aesthetic practices enacted by [the journal] *Semiotext(e)*.” [21]

A more specifically cultural event produced by Lotringer occurred in 1978, the “Nova Convention” celebrating the work of William Burroughs. Much of his fiction works by skating through strong associations between art, crime, police corruption, and government conspiracies. Kathy Acker, a writer who published in *X Magazine* and socialized in Colab circles in 1977 and ‘78, participated in this, as well as Laurie Anderson.

Some of the artists involved in Colab’s *X Magazine* – Diego Cortez and Michael Oblowitz – participated directly in the *Semiotext(e)* publishing initiative. They were not inclined to talk about this work, however; they were guarded and exclusive. [22]

Diego coined the term “eso-terrorism.” (It appears in a set of collages he published in the Colab-sponsored *Spanner* magazine.) Soon after, he quit Colab in a public fit of pique. He was the first; other founding members soon followed during successive meetings marked by rancorous quarrelling. Cortez went into music management. He worked with the punk-free-jazz band Contortions, together with Anya Phillips, who had traveled to Germany and watched the Holger Meins trial with him. For him, this world was far more exciting than Colab.

Coleen Fitzgibbon and Jenny Holzer’s “Manifesto Show” in 1979 was important for setting the stage for Colab artists’ engagement with politics. While there was no dominant point of view – it was, after all, a more or less open group

show – more documentary and political visual culture than art work was displayed. Much of it had to do with recent radical activists in the U.S., like the Black Panthers. Artists and viewers of the show discussed this material. I recall talking to Coleen about the idea for a real estate show based in an occupation at her studio space in 5 Bleecker Street during the "Manifesto Show." She felt that Colab shouldn't be doing anything illegal during this period when the state was becoming more aggressive in investigating artists.

She said Peter Fend had already been questioned by the FBI. She also talked about the Trilateral Commission's plans for New York City, a great conspiracy of the elites to control urban development. It all sounded a bit paranoid to me. Maybe it was my California experience, that during my student activist days – and I was quite peripheral to the real inner circles of organizers then – a number of my friends had been investigated, and at least one arrested on bomb charges. The whole thing was pretty comical. The provocateur was pretty transparent, and in the end they arrested a campus radio personality who had nothing to do with any political activity. My impression of this kind of police attention was that it was most often bumbling and misdirected. We were artists, and we were doing nothing wrong.

Ulli Rimkus, then treasurer of Colab and the partner of German artist Christof Kohlhöfer, took the same line with me, disapproving of the planned show and claiming it was irresponsible. Colab had only recently received state funding, and Ulli feared an illegal action would jeopardize that budding relationship. She and Christof both lived on Ludlow Street, which was some six or seven blocks from Delancey Street. (While I had an apartment on Houston Street, our core cadre – Becky and me together with Ann and Peter, were neighbors in a basement in Tribeca, far downtown, and Bobby lived in Brooklyn.) Christof told me stories of taking photographs during demonstrations in Germany which turned violent. Once, he said, he watched as the police slammed a door on a friend's hand, severing part of his finger. Clearly the German experience with police was different than mine.

I don't remember getting any answer from Robin Winters as to why he did not want to participate in the show. Since 1976, we lived across the hall from one another at 73 East Houston Street. But by 1979, neither of us was spending much time there.

When the Real Estate Show opened, it was accompanied by a classic manifesto, explaining the action in political and artistic terms. But this was not written with the original Colab group. During 1979, I was spending most of my time downtown, with Becky Howland in her place on Franklin Street in the Tribeca neighborhood, not far north of City Hall and Wall Street. Becky had become involved with Colab when she rented studio space from the

sculptor John Ahearn. John by then was working fulltime at Fashion Moda in the South Bronx, and had chosen to leave his Tribeca place and move uptown. Two sculptors, Ann Messner and Peter Moennig, took over the other half of John's basement, and we two couples spent a lot of time together. Ann and Becky had both done "uncommissioned" public sculptures in Tribeca, installing their works without permission and observing reactions. Ann also made films of her performance works, like blowing up a very large balloon in a crowded subway car, and stealing shirt after shirt from a crowded department store in Germany by putting them on.

Becky wrote, "Ann and I were friends. We were sculptors and neighbors. I lived on Franklin Street, and she lived on West Broadway near Warren Street. We talked on the phone a lot and encouraged each other's escapades, many of which were guerilla public sculptures. I liked working on the traffic islands in my neighborhood, and tied up the grass into arches on one, and made a portrait – [a small-scale cement model] – of the gas station on another. Ann re-did the crosswalks on [Wall Street at the corner of Cedar Street]. I was getting my scuba diving certification, and Ann decided to make a film with me walking in my full scuba gear through a subway car.... We were so excited about transgression – it was really exhilarating, but, of course, it was nerve-wracking too."

The Real Estate Show became possible because of interlocking dyadic relationships. "In 1979 Ann and I both got new boyfriends," Becky continues. "She hooked up with Peter Moennig around the same time I hooked up with Alan Moore, which was February 14, 1979. We introduced Peter and Alan, and then we the four of us were all just talking, talking, talking all the time. In April, Ann, Peter, and I all participated in a group exhibition at 75 Warren Street called 'A Salute to Creative Youth.' [Not a Colab show.] A lot of the discussions we had centered around my cave – my basement loft on Franklin Street, and what Alan called the Tribeca Pub Crawl – the artists' bars Magoo's, Puffy's, Barnabus Rex, and McGovern's. Also at Alan's tiny second floor apartment, which was close to the Soho crossroads of Broadway and Houston. Joseph Nechvatal lived almost in my backyard, on North Moore Street.

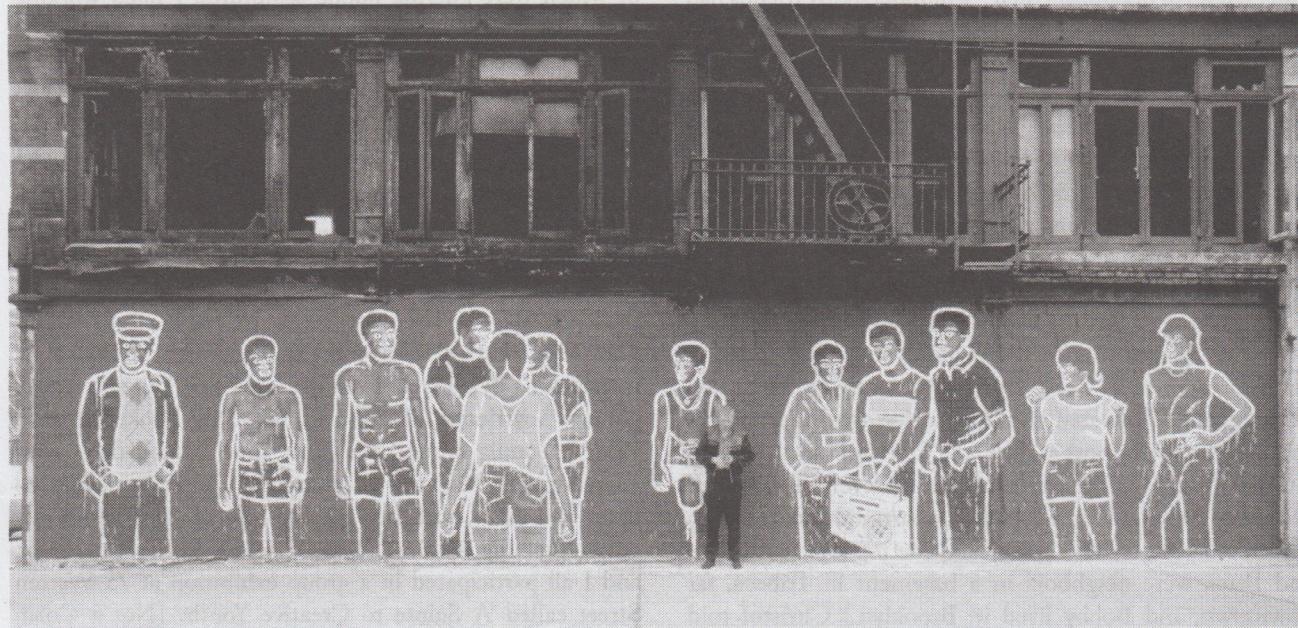
"Through [John], I met his twin brother Charlie [Ahearn, a filmmaker, who would later make the hip hop classic *Wild Style*], and then [sculptor] Christy Rupp. I think Christy had been evicted from one of the most infamous loft slumlord buildings, at 39 Walker Street. She began seeing Leonard Abrams, who [had] started an underground newspaper, the *East Village Eye*." (The first issue of the *Eye* included the above-mentioned article on the Real Estate Show.) "So that is how the core group was formed, through proximity and friendship: Alan and I, Ann and Peter, Joseph Nechvatal, and then Christy and Leonard. And maybe Peter Fend.... My recollection is that Alan had the

idea to do a show about Real Estate, but initially it didn't get very far with the Colab group. But then he found the building – the place to do it – and he sold us on the idea – me and Ann and Peter. It wasn't a hard sell, even when we realized that the building was owned by the city, and we were stymied by what ever red tape would be needed to get permission.... [T]he whole artists' loft movement had been founded on illegal occupations – that is, artists would rent commercial space and then start living there, illegally moving in. Everyone was afraid of getting evicted for living in a commercial space, but everyone did it....

"The core group approached Colab for funding. One rule of Colab was: there had to be two Colab members involved in the project – in addition to the project being open to others – [in

and factory floors into liveable "lofts" – was being directly exploited as a short-run strategy by owners. Artists were being evicted. The situation was becoming intolerable. In this sense, the Real Estate Show was a cry of pain.

We found a natural constituency among artists facing eviction or homelessness. Joseph Nechvatal had recently been evicted, and was squatting in Tribeca. His story seemed emblematic of what was happening to artists in Tribeca who were being rolled out of the district by gentrification. In 1979, Joseph was living in an abandoned methadone clinic far to the west on Canal Street. He had come to the space after a few bounces, first from a storefront on North Moore Street where the Colab artists' TV series Potato Wolf had produced a night of video screenings and music, then from



Robert Goldman (aka Bobby G), mural on Delancey Street, 1984. (Photo by Raimund Kummer)

order] to get funding, which we did receive. Something like \$300. We also got a similar amount from Artists' Space. The Downtown artists were the driving force behind the show."

The Tribeca district south of Canal Street where we were living was basically an extension of Soho, and full of artists. By the late 1970s it was gentrifying rapidly. [23] I don't think any of us were in touch with the academics researching artists in the city, or gentrification, nor the activists who were resisting it. Rather we were aware of what was going on in our neighborhoods. We could no longer find rental space we could afford. Suddenly, it seemed, everything had dried up – living space, studio space, loft space – all of it was becoming unaffordable. Blatantly exploitative deals were becoming more common – "you can have this place if you fix it up, and agree to leave after a year." The productive power of artists – their abilities to convert former commercial space

a loft on Walker Street. He wrote, "I had been subletting a loft on Walker Street from a painter.... This artist and her husband told me that they had had it with New York City and that they were moving permanently to the country to bring up their baby. After one year they changed their mind and kicked me out. I had nowhere to live so the kind Bob Bielecki (sound engineer to La Monte Young) helped me out." (Joseph had worked as an archivist for La Monte Young via the Dia Art Foundation. He was fired for using the photocopy machine to make art, to our way of thinking an indisputably noble cause.) "Bielecki let me stay in Laurie Anderson's loft at 530 Canal Street while she was away on tour in Europe. Something happened with her, and one night while I was asleep Laurie comes home to find me there. Bielecki took me and my sleeping bag downstairs to the recently vacated methadone center."

Joseph lived there for some months. While he was there, he installed a show of his drawings called "Private Parts." We held an organizing meeting for the Real Estate Show amidst his artworks. Before, we had been talking about our ideas and plans in the Tribeca bars, a thriving late night scene which drew artists from all over Lower Manhattan. Bobby G recalls talking to me in a bar about doing a show in an abandoned building. "That's all you said about it. You didn't say what the theme of the show was, or anything. Only that it was going to be in an abandoned building."

When he came to the meeting at the methadone clinic, he learned the details. Bobby was impressed by the manifesto we had written and distributed at the meeting. "It gave me a strong impetus to participate in this project, because I believed in what it said. I thought this was art-making on a high and serious level." Bobby was also impressed by a painting we found in the clinic and later put into the Real Estate Show. It depicted two gang members facing one another, one black and one Latino – "the Latin Jesters and the Bro Rebels. That to me was a statement about working collaboratively."

After that meeting, we had a core group of participants committed to the action. We turned our attention to producing materials for the show, including a classic manifesto. I made a short film, a "commercial" for the forthcoming show, featuring a shot of the building, using as soundtrack the Rodgers and Hart tune "I'll Take Manhattan" (1925), and showed it at a loft film screening. A crowd of artists, maybe 50 of them, saw this film. "It's very fancy on old Delancey Street, you know/ The subway charms us so, when balmy breezes blow to and fro." The song was perfect, because we were planning to "take" the building on Delancey Street, right next to the subway station. Our constituency of filmmakers who had participated or seen All Color News, Potato Wolf and other film projects of Colab thus became aware of the project. We knew that the word would spread through our networks. There were also some flyers and posters put out at art galleries, and pasted up on the streets beforehand, but not many. We didn't want the cops to be waiting for us!

December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1979, then still remembered as Pearl Harbor Day, Becky, Ann and I participated in a live-cable TV show organized by David Levine and Christof Kohlhöfer. (The videotape has been destroyed.) "We staged a takeover of the TV station," Becky writes. "I painted a woman in a chador, with a flap hiding a gun underneath, and drew posters of Uncle Sam, the recently deposed Shah of Iran, and the Ayatollah Khomeini. Ann and I dressed up in chadors – with fake guns – and charged into the station for the takeover." During this time, the U.S. embassy in Tehran was being occupied by students who had taken it in November. The staff was being held hostage, and documents revealing the U.S. role in Iran were being released in a steady stream.

Entry to the building at 125 Delancey Street was done in stages. First we scoped out the building, driving by in sculptor Scott Pfaffman's step van. Then a bunch of us set out at the appointed hour, carrying a borrowed fire department bolt cutter inside a guitar case. With his great strength, Peter Moennig finally succeeded in breaking the lock. That was the first part. Joseph Nechvatal recalls being hoisted over the locked gate by me and Peter so that he could open it from the inside. Then we put our own lock on the door, and left. A week later – New Year's Eve, 1979 – we returned to install the exhibition and have the opening party.

The power was on, so we had light. We first put an opaque window cleaner over the plate glass so it was less clear what we were up to. It should look like we were simply changing the window display in a normally functioning store. Fred Krughoff, an artist working as a contractor in construction came with us to the install. Fred realized that the building's gas and electrical systems were working, so he turned on the space heater, a blessing on that bitterly cold night. We cleaned up debris in the space, making it ready to install artwork.

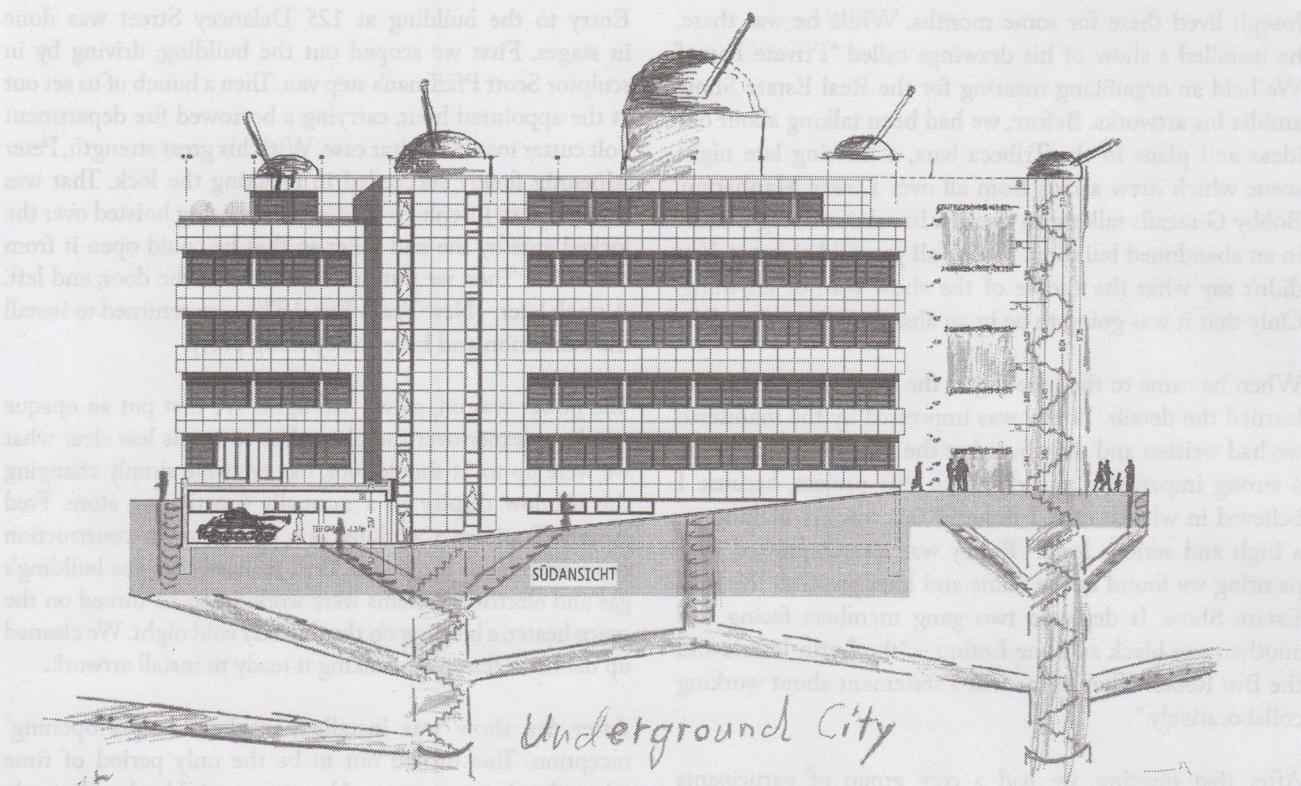
After the show was installed, we held a "pre-opening" reception. This turned out to be the only period of time when the show was open. Numerous neighborhood people wandered in to look, and some chatted with the artists. A bunch of children came rushing in. They ended up playing in a pile of cardboard we had pushed together in the back, singing and posing for the video cameras carried by Mitch Corber (black and white) and Matthew Geller (color).

During the installation, it wasn't clear who was going to show up with work. We had warned everyone participating that there was a good chance their work would be seized by the city, maybe even destroyed. Even so, the show had some good finished pieces in it as well as fast wall paintings and posters.

The works as I recall them, in no particular order, included Jane Dickson's renderings of schematic room interiors painted in white on black plastic trash bags; Cara Perlman's



(Photo by Ian Dryden)

Peter Mönnig, *Underground City*, pencil on paper, 1979.

painting on paper of a lamp glowing on a table in a burned-out apartment; Christof Kohlhöfer's painting of a black man being arrested by a white cop in Miami during the recent riots; and Gregory Lehmann's commercial color prints from real estate advertisements with sardonic comments grease-pencilled onto them. Mike Glier painted a crude wall mural with a sexual theme. He also propped up sticks of wood he had found with words painted on them, like "wisdom," "power," "riches," etc. Edit DeAk, an art writer, tacked up photostats of a medieval manuscript of the Book of the Apocalypse. Ann Messner put up blank city eviction notices coupled with photographs she had taken of homeless men living on the street in the area. Warren Tanner, co-director of the Organization of Independent Artists, brought along an impromptu collage of texts relating to real estate. Scott Pfaffman brought a kind of roof-shaped sculpture comprised of many years worth of old Alabama license plates. His friend Richard Mock brought a print of a donkey fucking the Empire State building.

Becky cut the stencils for her large Real Estate Show poster, showing an octopus grasping buildings. She spray-painted a bunch of them on the spot to post on the street, as an invitation to the show. Coleen Fitzgibbon – "Y" – and Robin Winters – "X" – as mentioned above, put their work in the windows. Coleen put up photostats from her archive films. Robin put up an ink on paper drawing of a landlord with the caption "Pay or Get Out," and another quick chalk on canvas, of an anguished stick figure, captioned "Broke." Some artists brought stacks of printed flyers – Peter

Moennig's "Plan to Turn N.Y. into a Bunker City," Coleen Fitzgibbon's "Landlord Extortion," and Robin Winters' "Landlords Do Not Provide Adequate Services," copied from an anonymous jeremiad against landlords we had seen posted on the street. Christy Rupp made a small copper house-shaped terrarium containing two live mice which had bedded in a copy of her Wall Street area lease. They chewed it up in order to "soften their habitat." She also had drawings, including one of a woman freezing to death in her city-owned apartment. Bobby arranged his cigarette packs, Mitch Corber videotaped the artists at work and children at play with his 1/2" Sony Portapak.

We had warned artists to be prepared to lose their work. Still, there were two larger works in the show. Bobby G mounted a pile of cigarette packs painstakingly collected over weeks, with a statement declaring that instead of being wasted in this way, the money Lower East Siders spent on cigarettes could go towards community renewal. Peter Fend showed large photostat and type collages spelling out his plan for delivering cheap methane from seaweed to the Lower East Side – "No Con Ed." He also showed images of some of the architectural plans that had been proposed for the Lower East Side, both the realistic and the utopian. At the opening of the Real Estate Show, we met a neighbor who lived down the block. She was organizing to resist eviction of the large city-owned apartment building where she lived. We agreed to support the tenants' struggle, and immediately exhibited information about it.

Peter Fend wrote a letter to the architectural magazine *Skyline*, stating: "Artists organizing the Real Estate Show want the community as a group to be aware of what has happened to them and what has been planned by others for them. They want the community to see visions of their future, to have a say in what actually occurs, to help each other in realizing a future far better than what only certain bureaucracies have been able to build in recent years." [24]

Becky writes, "We had a great New Year's Eve party. When it wound down, Alan and I eventually made our way over to an empty lot on Spring Street. John Halpern and his crew for some reason had dug a big pit in the ground, and we kept rolling down the sides and laughing our heads off. New Year's Eve was on a Monday night, so the whole week was sort of a workers holiday. However, the party was over when we returned to Delancey Street on January 2nd, to find that our lock had been removed, and a new one installed in its place."

The city had reclaimed their property, and our art show was locked away inside the place. We called up the city – and the press – and complained. That evening we went on cable access television for the regularly scheduled Potato Wolf show, and made the half hour into a "Real Estate Show show," talking about the situation, and showing video from the opening. Becky hand-lettered large signs in English and Spanish, explaining what had happened., and we pasted them on the side of the building. We also posted on walls throughout the neighborhood and in Soho, complaining about the city closing our show.

"We decided to hold a press conference in front of the building on Tuesday January 8," Becky continues, "and made flyers 'Art Held Hostage' to invite people. Naturally, Alan and I were late; as usual we could not get out of bed. However, a couple of great coincidences occurred. When we arrived, the assistant city commissioners from HPD (New York City's Housing, Preservation, and Development department), who were in charge of this little blue building, were already there. They sat in their car in front of the building. Then who popped out of their car but Denny Kelly. I had met her the year before – she was an artist working as a waitress in a cafe on Duane Street, where I had worked on the construction crew. But now she was working as the assistant to the assistant commissioner. So – there was Denny Kelly, who said, 'Hello Becky, what are you doing here?!"

Christy Rupp had done the publicity for the conference, which was attended by reporters for the *New York Times*, *New York Post*, *Soho Weekly News*, *East Village Eye*, and *Village Voice*. "And then we were further in luck," Becky continued, "when Joseph Beuys arrived. He was in town, giving a talk at Cooper Union. Peter Moennig, who'd studied with him in Düsseldorf, invited him to our press conference, and he showed up, with his art dealer Ronald Feldman. A reporter and photographer from the *New York Times* came too, and

they ran a story with a photograph on the front page of the Metro section."

Cara Brownell came to the press conference with a Sony Portapak. Joe Lewis carried a microphone, and interviewed people on the street, including some of the city officials who showed up.

The video no longer exists. But Joe Lewis told me, "I talked to Beuys through a translator.... He was very stoic. He didn't really say much. He kind of nodded his head.... said, 'I like what you're doing here,' or something like that." Joe also clearly recalled a meeting the night before the press conference, "where we were going to get canned goods and water and stuff to stay, because the police were gonna come, we were gonna lock ourselves into the place.... They were trying to build a strategy the night before the police were gonna come.... Maybe 10, 15 cops showed up.... The second the police got there to close it down, everybody split." (While I don't remember any of this, I'll confess that I am a chicken at heart.)

"After the press conference," Becky recalls, we went to a bar and had lunch. "Then we returned to the site of the building. I'd always intended to make a mural on the building, but with all of the activities to organize the show, and the flyers and posters, it ended up being the last part to be done.... I remember surveying the front of the building rather glumly when we returned. Since we no longer had access to the building, I thought that I could not get up to the second floor to wheat-paste [the mural] to front of the building. But I think it was Peter who suggested that I climb up! He gave me a leg up the building, so I scrambled up to the ledge, and then Harry Spitz came up too. And he helped me to wheat-paste this 11 foot long Octopus Mural to the top story of the building. It was really windy, so it was comical – the limbs whipping around – and also fraught with the adrenaline from the morning's events. But for me as an artist, and a fairly shy one – this was a great moment – to be encouraged and appreciated by my fellow artists – and to see this piece in place on the building as I'd imagined it. (It stayed there for about six months [before]... becoming unglued, so I went back and retrieved it.) Then John Halpern climbed up and painted in big letters – The Real Estate Show."

"What happened next," Becky writes, "was astonishing! The combination of unprecedeted publicity and personalities persuaded the city to agree to meet with us and discuss a solution. The city had removed our artwork from the building on January 11, and we wanted it back. 'Art held Hostage!' We also wanted to continue our show – to create a temporary citizen's center. Denny Kelly facilitated much of the logistics for our discussion. The city absolutely would not give us the Real Estate Show building on Delancey Street because number one, we'd broken into it, and number two, they said it was ear-marked for other things. [For decades after, the building sat empty, forever unused, until it was

finally demolished in the early 2000s.] However, they gave us a list of buildings and spaces to choose from. That winter was brutally cold and all the locations were abandoned, with no heat – there were icicles hanging from the ceilings! For the month of February, we took a temporary location at a storefront at 172 Delancey Street, closer to the entrance to the Williamsburg Bridge than our original location, and did a show, film screenings, and performances there. Then we found the space at 156 Rivington Street – a storefront with a back courtyard that was filled with rubble, ailanthus trees, and tremendous potential, and moved to that location in March 1980. It was amazing, but, at the same time we thought: 'Of course, this is the way things ought to work out!'

Becky's sense of a sure happy ending based on reasonable people reasoning together was supported by her unexpected personal connection with Denny Kelly – who ultimately produced and signed the "permission to use" letter. Bobby G's perspective on the negotiations with the city was very different. For him, the process began on the street the day of the press conference. We talked, and I told him that the videotape Joe Lewis and Cara Brownell had made has disappeared.

"I was standing there with them," he replied. "During the whole time of this press conference, or 'grand re-opening of the Real Estate Show,' there was a city car parked right in front with the engine running and the windows up and the heat on because it was about 25 degrees that day. And Joe Lewis coaxed the people out of the car. I remember this exchange. The guy was short with black hair and a moustache. His name was Manny Mirabal, and he's not the Columbia professor who wrote the biography of Malcolm X! So Joe is conducting the interview. And he puts the microphone into Manny Mirabal's face and he says, 'What's your name?' And Manny responds, 'What's your name?' And Joe says, 'Joe Lewis.'

"And Manny Mirabal thought he was putting him on. He didn't believe him. It was absurd.... Mirabal said... 'It just so happens that we're going to be working late tonight. It doesn't have to do with this, or with you guys. But we're going to be working late, and when you're finished here, why don't you come downtown and talk to us about this and see what happens.'

"He invited us into this negotiation, because I always thought they were really intimidated sitting in their heated car watching these newspaper reporters, and photographers, and Joseph Beuys. They wanted to be able to tell their bosses the next morning when this stuff came out in the papers that they were on top of it. That's why they wanted us to come there late that night.... They knew that the next morning it was going to be trouble. It was really the artists' power of the media and the press that engaged the city."

We went to the negotiations at the HPD offices on Maiden Lane. "That's where the Federal Reserve Bank of New York is," said Bobby. "I remember going up into this well-appointed conference room with Joe – and Joe and Cara's

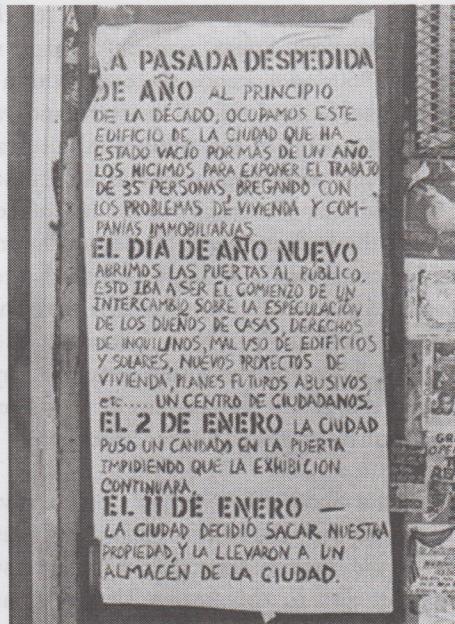
video was really instrumental in this negotiation. The first thing that came up was that the people from HPD said, 'No video.' And we said, 'What do you mean no video? This is our art project. The video is essential to it. And in fact, because you interceded in it, you're in it now. And now it's because of you guys that this has become a social sculpture. The video is really essential, and we don't turn it off lightly.'

"Before I got involved with this I had been working [as a CETA program artist] for the Summer Youth Employment Program in Jamaica, Queens, with these heavy duty political organizers from the black community, organizers in South Jamaica Houses, which is the biggest housing project in Queens. And I knew a lot of their rhetoric, and how they thought, and the way they saw things. And I felt really comfortable talking to these people in the city."

When the HPD people demanded that Joe and Cara turn off the video, "I immediately thought, wow, now we're in a real negotiation. They're making a demand, and we have to respond. We can either accept their demand or deny their demand. And then we kind of had a private little conference among ourselves. I remember suggesting that if we accept this demand to turn off the video, which is really detrimental to the project, what are they going to offer in return. And that's actually when they offered an alternative space. They made a demand, and we had to decide right away how to respond. They were nervous. One of the reasons they were so uptight was that the Real Estate Show was right smack dab on the edge of the Seward Park Development Project where they had razed all the buildings and done nothing since 1964. There was just an article in the *New York Times* about how they have a plan to redevelop the Seward Park area 50 years later. You didn't know that, did you?" Bobby asked me. "It was exposing exactly what you claimed, their misuses and mismanagement of real property on the Lower East Side. So many people got evicted out of there back in the '60s... They were embarrassed about their inaction."

"It was so serendipitous, because first of all the heat and lights were working in that building. But you didn't know that. The idea was brilliant from the beginning, but the way it unfolded was just luck. Really it was because the city intervened, that's what made it kind of big. Otherwise it would have been what you conceived of, three weeks and it would have been over."

The Real Estate Show was the outcome of a rare conjunction of artists' self-organizing, artistic ideation, determined innovation, publicity seeking, radical political ideology, and performative action. It was dependent upon a unique set of historical circumstances – the exploitation of artists in broad schemes of revaluation and repurposing of urban districts; the dissolution of radical organization and disintegration of the promises of change by the '60s and '70s social movements, and the emergence of the neoliberal ideology and get-ahead ethos that would mark the Reagan



Becky Howland, broadside pasted onto 125 Delancey Street

era. It was a period of aesthetic uncertainty and experiment after a decade of unsettling of the forms of art. At the same time, an emergent infrastructure of demi-institutions was consolidating to service the new forms of art, and the surge in young artists who had come to New York City to practice them. Finally, we saw the sudden appearance at our side of a famous European artist who insisted upon some intrinsic relation between art and politics, some duty, obligation, or metaphysic that combined them.

The show was also undertaken at a key moment in Colab's history, when the artists who had started the group were divided and disenchanted, and new artists were interested in becoming involved in the self-organized network, and the social and political intentions that seemed to ground it. For Colab, the Real Estate Show marked the end of the old and the beginning of the new. An infatuation with the political had resulted in an art exhibition – an aesthetic event – conceived as direct action politics.

Within months, artists who had worked at Fashion Moda in the South Bronx, and at ABC No Rio on the Lower East Side combined with many others in Colab produced the Times Square Show. For all the fame of that exhibition, I feel that this show cannot be seen apart from the artistic initiatives launched by privileged young artists within New York City's poor districts which came together in the historically working class entertainment district in the city center. That combination turned out to be a potent pill of cultural change.

For me, the conception of the Real Estate Show was really only to do this action, carefully planned and tactically successful. It was a car-crash art show, like a cinema stunt – the show crashes into the space and is suddenly there. But

it was a "smash hit" in a way we did not at all anticipate. We had no plans for what came out of it, except to respond to events as they unfolded, fast and furious. The combination of responses among our troika – me, Becky Howland and Robert Goldman – formed the palette of organizational temper for ABC No Rio during its first years. We continued to organize activities at the space as we had the Real Estate Show, through regular open consensual meetings.

Over the years, the example of the initial action – an occupation by a collective of artists – would resonate with the later cadres of cultural activists who worked at ABC No Rio, and with our friends in Europe.

The Real Estate Show was different in kind from all other Colab projects. It was an action first, and a show second. The organization of both the action and the show was fully collective every step of the way, with different people playing key significant roles at each step of the process. It was a classic transgressive action – a provocation and a response, playing out together in an intricate dance toward an indeterminate result.

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In preparing this text, I queried the artists in the show. Many came back with carefully considered historical reflections, some of which has been integrated into the narrative above.

Stefan Einst, founder and director of Fashion Moda, attended the opening of the Real Estate Show with William Scott and John Ahearn. (Scott later worked on the Absurdities Show at ABC No Rio.) Stefan said of the show, "I thought it was in conjunction with the Colab and Fashion Moda stuff. It came from this same approach, that we took matters in our own hands and exhibited and then made history. Instead of the galleries making all the decisions, there are other options available to artists."

Walter Robinson, an arts writer and painter who was then closely involved with Colab, wrote: "My memory of the time is largely one of being carried along by apparently mundane events, and then being astonished at their reception as historical. Was my thinking an example of cynical reason? The idea of breaking into a city-owned building? Impossible for a square like me, a protestant from Oklahoma, so kudos to the brave neurotics who dared cut the locks and face down the police.... The upshot of it all -- the press, the visit by Joseph Beuys, the birth of No Rio -- was, like I said, astonishing, but is an indelible demonstration of the way that a group of artists can in fact take charge of the meaning of their own production."

"The Real Estate Show was more important as an action than it was as an exhibition," wrote Mike Glier, "and the bolt cutter that snipped the lock on the door to 123 Delancey Street was the agent of that action and, as such, the most

compelling object in the exhibition. Bolt cutters transform modest motion into extreme force. As a contributor to the exhibition, I was one of many artists who placed a hand, figuratively speaking, on the long handle of the cutter, adding my bit of pressure to the collective force of the artists involved. A small hub of colleagues, the Committee for the Real Estate Show, served to focus this collective energy more powerfully than was usual in Colab Projects by organizing an art show around an act of civil disobedience, the cutting of the lock on 123 Delancey Street. Snipping the lock was scary and thrilling for me, an artist for whom dialog was and has remained the preferred form of cultural engagement. With the snip of the lock, all the talk about wealth, property, fairness and the role of creative people in developing communities was transformed into action. With the snip of the lock, our youthful feelings about authority, autonomy, and agency were shaped into principles. It was the moment when I realized that dialog has its limits, particularly between parties whose power is unequal. The snip of the lock was a declaration that the context for discussion sometimes needs to be reset with an act that is outside the norm....

“The act of the Real Estate show was in retrospect a positive one, with a good outcome and it lives large in my memory for the ensuing debate, never resolved, about the use of force as a catalyst for social justice. “

Joseph Nechvatal had a deeply theoretical point of view on the group Colab: “What I early on detected in Colab and ABC No Rio was that art could be expressed in complex rich ways that were non-linear but, nevertheless, which displayed long-term tendencies and organizational patterns.... While the pre-Colab art system isolated physical objects from their surrounding, the attraction of Colab chaos was founded on the realization that the art system is connected to power, subject to flows of money, matter and energy which move constantly through them. Inversely, the dynamic imbalance of ABC No Rio resulted from chaotic energy that manifested a creative process that generated richly organized patterns that teetered on the complex stable and the complex unstable.

“It is neither surprising nor coincidental that a paradigmatic epistemological change in art at large would follow these developments. I can even say that culture experienced a bifurcation as a result of Collaborative Projects style activity, and the artists of Colab all represented their own particular bifurcation within the cultural field.

“In critical studies and in an array of philosophical discourses, chaotic approaches to order and composition have been addressing the rhizomatic-decentralized modes of distribution that I first experienced in Collaborative Projects. When New York art began a Colab influenced examination of its heterogeneous system, it initiated a true break with modernism.”

Ann Messner, part of the core group that “cracked” the building on Delancey Street, wrote: “Perhaps resulting from a shared 1960s’ adolescence, there was within Colab a collective disregard for institutional structures and traditional modes of practice. Out of the cultural malaise caused by Vietnam, the tragic assassinations of quixotic public figures, the images of kids being hosed and in the case of Kent State gunned down, the indiscriminate blazing of the inner city already in desperate need of repair, very little that remained standing seemed at all respectable. Just as with the neglected neighborhoods, particularly in New York where we chose to live, reality had fallen apart exposing distressing hypocrisy. And not surprisingly our relationship as artists to culture took on the form of refusal and deconstruction.

“The Real Estate Show was a hedge; a provocative stance deployed to expose the city’s nefarious relationship to not only the urgent concerns of an impoverished community but also to the creative desires of a vibrant counterculture movement. Our action: the occupation of 123 Delancey Street and the mounting of the exhibition ‘The Real Estate Show’ proved a test of opposing wills. In retrospect the bravado of multiple break-ins, as evidenced in the photographic documentation, appears awkwardly humorous (oversized bolt cutters in a guitar case) but at the time the direct and forceful dealings with the city, although remaining non-violent, were not at all pleasant. If it were not for the brief attendance of Joseph Beuys in support of our action there may have been more severe consequences (his Guggenheim retrospective had landed him front page notoriety in the tabloids and as such his presence seemed to intimidate the city officials). As it was a stalemate ensued, ultimately ending in our favor with the granting of a temporary space at another location, as the city struggled with embarrassing damage control in the press.”

“The RES provided a window into what was possible,” Christy Rupp wrote. “I had been interested in polling people about their opinions of urban wildlife, and struck by how negative the response was from adults and positive or at least curious from kids. I got to thinking why not let kids teach their parents about safe ways to keep mice, rats and roaches out, by learning about animal behavior. (This was the motivation for the first Animals Living in Cities exhibit at Fashion Moda summer of 1979.) So all of a sudden we had a living laboratory, in our fishbowl on Delancey Street, that welcomed all sorts of feedback about this and any number of other housing related questions. It got shut down so fast, but the seed was planted and its energy was not going away. Beyond the demand for attention to the city’s hoarding of housing stock, letting it fall apart under the weight of neglect, it was a moment to say, hey, people live in these hulks, they are living systems. Maybe they’re unsafe or abandoned, but they are alive. We had access to the housing crisis as a lab for solutions, because we could see it more holistically as a collective question, than as individuals.”

Jon Keller, who perhaps alone of all the artists had a background in community organizing, wrote of the show. "Agitate and Educate. An Occupation of unused space for an angry and provocative and visual show by young people who hadn't become established, few ties that bind as yet. An earlier Occupy to shake up the bars of the cage that surrounds us...."

"I moved to 10th St between B & C during those years and watched as Real Estate came in and changed the name from Loisaida to Alphabet Town conscious of the fact that as a white face over here, I helped pave the way for the gentrifiers to move in and push the working class and lumpen out. It's been 40 years since the Real Estate Show took place, this enormous blocks-wide parking lot, truly a Separation Wall between the middle class largely Jewish and otherwise white, below Grand St and the Brown people, Spanish speaking largely, above Delancey St. I guess now that there are more white people down near Delancey St the powers that be feel comfortable about developing those empty lots surrounding what was the Real Estate Show. It's actually a pretty big project with housing, recreation areas, stores. ABC No Rio given to mollify us after the Real Estate Show helped also to make the area attractive to white (and other) hipsters, in turn attractive to Real Estate. Artists as Missionaries paving the way for colonial occupation."

Joe Lewis said he "always thought No Rio was a pretty good outcome for that kind of confrontational relationship between artists who had a social perspective, and the city and community. I saw it as a win." Joe thought the situation could have been "catastrophic had the people really been more politicized. I grew up – you know I was in a guerrilla street theater with the Young Lords Party. I wasn't in the Young Lords Party, but the company we were working with were. I knew people who were in prison for real political activity.... I didn't see any of us folks as really being so political." For the artists involved in the Real Estate Show and at Fashion Moda, Joe "didn't know if it was just to try to position themselves as a way to release themselves from their roots, their own personal roots, or was it just something at the time that made sense."

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Like Joe Lewis, Peter Mönnig had misgivings about the political and aesthetic coherence of the Real Estate Show artists. "It was an individualistic approach," he said. "There was acceptance, but there was no debate about these things. I was interested that metaphors turn into action. Now that we have action, I say, 'Well, think about the aesthetic. Deliver an aesthetic that starts out with Gordon Matta-Clark and his metaphors towards what we are doing now.' So I felt a little bit like this nerd, looking back, our positions shift, right? But it's a good time [now]. There are lots of kids who have a similar thinking."

Thinking about the Real Estate Show now means thinking about occupation, which has once again become a focal tactic in the 2011 wave of global rebellions. The rise of the Occupy movement has put a sharp new emphasis on the question of occupation. Some recent theoretical discussion may help to interrogate the Real Estate Show action. At the time we did it, it seemed that the action had no precedent among artists. Not so in politics. The tactic of occupation as a means of drawing attention to a political cause was widely known, beginning with the famous "sit-ins" by African-Americans and their white compatriots at lunch counters in the segregated American South and locally in the occupation of buildings at Columbia University in 1968.

Europeans may have been aware of the recent Italian tactic of occupying to create a social center, which began in force in the mid-1970s. [25] These social centers included extensive cultural components, but they were founded by political activists with political intentions. Peter Mönnig spoke of ABC No Rio as a "Freiraum," or free space, a locution that comes from German anarchists. The practice of squatting – generally to create "house projects," where people could live and work collectively – did not begin in earnest in Germany until the 1980s, and then mainly in Berlin. Puerto Ricans in New York City organized by the Young Lords Party had occupied buildings with political intention. Joe Lewis knew of their work, and probably talked about it with us. But we were not in contact with these groups. They were nationalist, usually Marxist-Leninist, and remained separate from Anglos and the downtown artworld.

But beyond the historical precedents for the tactic in radical politics, what could occupation by artists mean in 1979? I think that it may be a variant of Nicholas Mirzoeff's concept of the "right to look," [26] we were asserting our "right to be seen" as artists, the right to be seen to exist, and for our work to be seen. This is, finally, the rationale for graffiti art, which was widely discussed, and its practices emulated, among artists in New York in the 1970s. "Writers" of graffiti have long claimed "art is not a crime." For them, many coming from poor ghetto communities, the idea that the right of the artist to be seen, and the right of the artists' community to see relates to the service that graffiti art performs. Enlivening the public environment counts for more than the mere right of the property owner to maintain publicly visible walls empty of any kind of marks or signs. While it is not recognized as a right, it can be argued that it is a superior social good. Making street art comes from a strong desire, a felt necessity; it is rebellious, a desire under restraint as an ever-tightening gyre of prohibitions binds public behavior worldwide.

Our show was not street art. It was an attempt by artists to exercise their public function, to interact with a community, to make an environment to talk to people about matters that concerned them. This strongly felt necessity of public

discourse led us to open up a place, publically owned and unused, where this could happen.

The key feeling I have long held onto from the Real Estate Show experience was the incredible air of freedom we breathed as we began to install the show. [27] We were experiencing, as J. Martin Pedersen writes in his essay on the philosophy of property, “the process of revolution – of stepping into our power-to, right here and now – [which] is not simply a matter of organising our social relations, but to organise our social relations with regards to things.” [28] As Mirzoeff wrote in October of 2011, “Occupy theory is what you do as you occupy.” It arises directly out of praxis, as people come together to “explore new ways of experiencing the general will.” [29]

In his text on property and commoning, Pederson tries to open up an analytic that includes both common and private property in order to understand the free software movement. He calls the notion that all property is private “economistic” – it is understood in a way that detaches it from any further moral, political and social discussion. Indeed in daily speech, “It’s private” stops the conversation; it’s a speed bump in social relations – “Sorry, that’s private.” (Even so, in our moment, privately owned social networking platforms are repaving the landscape of social relations by specifically removing personal privacies of all kinds.)

We are in a new period of capitalist universalism, Pedersen states. Still: “All attempts in the history of theorizing about property to provide a univocal explication of the concept of ownership, applicable within all societies and to all resources, have failed.” Particular notions of property can undergo change at any moment in time. Pedersen recounts the historically violent emergence of capitalism in the 17th century, the story of the enclosures by aristocrats of common lands, and the popular resistance to them led by Diggers, Levelers, and other “commoners.” The word, as a verb, is explicated by historian Peter Linebaugh: “Commoners first think not of title deeds, but human deeds.... Second, commoning is embedded in a labor process; it inheres in a particular praxis.... Common rights are entered into by labor. Third, commoning is collective. Fourth, being independent of the state, commoning is independent also of the temporality of the law and state.” [30]

All these actions, of which the Real Estate Show forms one link in a long chain, have a purpose. “The purpose,” according to Pedersen, “is to locate the collective right of commoning – collective action based on shared values, particularly the principles of cooperation and self-organisation – as a counter-point to the kind of individual, private property rights that characterise capitalist democracy.” Clearly, how we organize an action is the key to convincingly and collectively asserting a right to “common” – or to occupy.

Like free software, we were committed to “commons-based peer production.” [31] The question with ABC No Rio

became how to run an “alternative space” that was really open source – or as we thought of it then, open door. That was to be something like what was slowly emerging during the decade of the 1970s, primarily through the work of the Institute for Art & Urban Resources, Creative Time and other public art commissioning agencies who were using vacant properties and land. Their projects, while they were public were not in common; they were entirely administrated.

Our show extended the anti-curatorial ideology expressed within the Colab group to its maximum extent. One of our principle competitors in the official realm was Alanna Heiss, one of the curators who were building contemporary art institutions committed to new art in different ways than the existing modernist formations. Alanna Heiss had close ties within the city government, and had been allowed to use many vacant properties for all sorts of art-related purposes. Rhetoric within the Colab group contested the role of curators and administrators within the artworld. Why should she alone decide which artists get to do something in a vacant city-owned building?

First Fashion Moda and then the Real Estate Show and ABC No Rio were moves outside the realm of conventional art exhibition. It was a “no” to the art gallery as a space – be it private or public – which was bounded and controlled by administrators, curators, and dealers. Our reclaimed space would be controlled only by artists, and those who worked and interacted with them – by users only. Today, the situation is a good deal more “conventional,” as massive corporate subsidies, often by socially questionable companies, sustain contemporary art institutions, and the private market is highly speculative. As Occupy activist Noah Fischer recently put it, “real, essential culture needs distance from this power and influence in order to grow and thrive.” [32]

What is real? Presence – being there, in the place. As the Reverend Daniel Berrigan said as he demonstrated in Zucotti Park near Wall Street on June 8, 2012, “We are here to restore the reality of real estate.” [32]



*This essay was originally commissioned by The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage in Philadelphia.*

#### NOTES

1 – Exhibition catalogue, Shawna Cooper and Karli Wurzelbacher, eds., *Times Square Show Revisited: Accounts of the Landmark 1980 Exhibition* (Hunter College, CUNY, 2012), and the more complete website, at: <http://www.timessquareshowrevisited.com>; Max Schumann, “A Show about Colab (and Related Activities),” 2011, at Printed Matter, NYC, for which a catalogue is planned.

# SHAH GOES BACK

# EXXON MOBIL TRIAL OPENS

Peter Fend

2 – I have published on the Real Estate Show in Moore and Marc Miller, eds., *ABC No Rio: Story of a Lower East Side Art Gallery* (Collaborative Projects, NY, 1985), parts of which book are online at 98bowery.com; also in Moore, *Art Gangs: Protest and Counter Culture in New York City* (Autonomedia, NY, 2011). I have given a number of talks on the subject. My writings from this time were lost during an illegal eviction from my studio in East Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in 1987.

3 – Artists who responded to the 2012 call include Rebecca Howland, Ann Messner, Joseph Nechvatal, Christy Rupp, Mike Glier, Jon Keller, Scott Pfaffman, and Stefan Eins. I interviewed Peter Mönnig, Robert Goldman (aka Bobby G), and Joe Lewis.

4 – Lehmann Weichselbaum, “Real Estate Show,” *East Village Eye*, February 1980; reprinted in Moore & Miller, *op. cit.* More of these texts are posted online at the history section of ABC No Rio’s website.

5 – Mitch Corber’s documentary 1/2” video reel, “Pre-Real Estate Show 79-80 (1979)” (30 min.; 1979), is online at: [https://archive.org/details/XFR\\_2013-08-14\\_2B\\_07](https://archive.org/details/XFR_2013-08-14_2B_07).

6 – Josh Barbanell, “Artists Ejected in Occupation of a Storefront,” *New York Times*, January 9, 1980; posted at [http://www.abcnrio.org/about/history/times\\_80.html](http://www.abcnrio.org/about/history/times_80.html).

7 – Gerald Marzorati, “The Artful Dodger,” *Soho Weekly News*, January 10, 1980.

8 – See Clayton Patterson, Joe Flood, Alan Moore, Howard Seligman, editors, *Resistance: A Social and Political History of the Lower East Side* (Seven Stories Press, NY, 2007), and the graphic novel by Seth Tobocman, *War in the Neighborhood* (Autonomedia, NY, 1999) for more on this long struggle. There is also much online, notably by Chris Flash and *The Shadow*, Bill Brown aka Not Bored, the MorUS Museum of Reclaimed Urban Spaces, etc..

9 – Julie Ault, ed., *Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Lauren Rosati and Mary Anne Staniszewski, eds., *Alternative Histories: New York Art Spaces, 1960-2010* (MIT Press, 2013). see also Art Spaces Archives Project at [www.as-ap.org/](http://www.as-ap.org/).

10 – See “X-Magazine Benefit,” a film by Coleen Fitzgibbon and Alan W. Moore (11 min.; 1978/2009), posted , at: <http://vimeo.com/28997394>.

11 – Some of this work was distributed by Colab’s MWF Video Club from 1986-2000. Some of that was transferred to digital media, and posted online after the July 2013 “XFR STN” project exhibition at the New Museum; see: <https://archive.org/details/xfrstn>.

12 – These included the Batman Show (November 1977, curated by Diego Cortez in Robin Winters’ studio at 591 Broadway), the Doctors & Dentists Show (January-February 1979, open, at 591) concurrent with Income & Wealth Show (Coleen Fitzgibbon’s studio at 5 Bleeker), the Dog Show (May, 1979 at 591 Broadway), the Manifesto Show (May 1979 at 5 Bleeker), “Exhibit A” at 93 Grand St (curated by Michael McClard and Liza Bear) that same year.

13 – Artists’ collective work was presaged by the Art Workers Coalition some ten years earlier, and continued to be actively discussed by the Artists Meeting for Cultural Change in the mid-1970s. See Moore, *Art Gangs, op. cit.*

14 – Samuel Anderson, “Inherent Vice: Contagion and the Archive in The Times Square Show,” *E-misférica 6.1* (New York University, n.d. 2009?) at <http://hemi.nyu.edu/hemi/en-e-misferica-61/s-anderson>. Walter Robinson called this Colab style of installation the “milieu show.”

15 – Email to the author from Coleen Fitzgibbon, February 10, 2012.

16 – Gordon Matta-Clark was also planning to do a project on the Lower East Side, where ABC No Rio was established. He planned to work with the community group CHARAS to open an ecology center. Matta-Clark had been inspired by a visit to an abandoned factory occupied as a social center by young radicals in Milan. Although he received the money from a grant, Gordon died before he could begin this project. The CHARAS group later took over an abandoned school near a community garden they had established. “El Bohio”(the hut) was established in 1979, the same year as the Real Estate Show occupation. (A.W. Moore, “Real Green Jobs Lie in the Past” in Common Room and Kim Förster, eds., *Arts for Living: Public Architecture and Architectural Education*, Common Books, NYC and Brussel, 2013.) See Libertad Guerra’s text on CHARAS in this booklet.

17 – Scott and Beth B later used this documentary work as the basis for a featurette fiction film, *G-Man*. See Jack Sargeant, *Deathtripping: The Cinema of Transgression* (1995).

18 – Mike Davis, *Buda's Wagon: A Brief History of the Car Bomb* (2006).

19 – I was disturbed by the misapplication of what I took to be a precise term, “terrorism” denoting the murder of civilians for political purposes, carried out during this period by groups like the French OAS, the Irish IRA, the Palestinian PLO, the Italian rightists in the “strategy of tension,” and others. The denomination was extended by rightist governments against their left-wing opponents throughout Latin America during the period of the dictators. By now, the word “terrorist” as used by governments and much of mainstream media is nearly meaningless. Still, like pornography, people know it when they see it.

20 – Yvonne Rainer’s feature film *Journeys from Berlin/1971* (1980) explores the German context for the RAF actions. Rainer was a longtime teacher at the Whitney Independent Study Program, where many of the original Colab members studied.

21 – “Memories of a Semiotext(e) reader,” posted at Michaelgoddard.wordpress.com on April 2, 2011. While this line of theorizing – particularly that of Guatarri and Deleuze – was closely connected to left politics, this relation was not so clear at the time. Current left thought in the U.S. then was rather bleak and unpromising. Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, available in translation from the Detroit anarchist publishers Black & Red, to me seemed dark, densely Marxist, minoritarian and anti-art in a way that offered no direction. Other Situationist texts, more tactical and humorous, had not yet been translated.

22 – Only Duncan Smith, a gay academic, seemed interested in sharing his thoughts with artists curious about the new theories. He was an avid Lacanian, and published in *X Magazine*. Smith was an early victim of AIDS.

FNquarrel – These heated arguments had usually to do with various activities undertaken by one or another of which another disapproved. I recall that these had mainly to do with artworld opportunities which had been obtained in the name of the group, but pursued by individuals. To exhume them, see Andrea Callard Papers, Series I: Collaborative Projects, Inc. (Colab), Fales Library and Special Collections, Bobst Library, New York University.

23 – See A.W. Moore with Debra Wacks, “Being There: The Tribeca Neighborhood of Franklin Furnace” *The Drama Review* (special issue on Franklin Furnace), Spring 2005, vol. 49, no. 1.

24 – Moore and Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 59. I don’t know if this letter was published by *Skyline*.

25 – In 1979 the European squatting movement was still young. (There is as yet no English language history.) An example of the Italian center is discussed in Andrea Membretti, “Centro Sociale Leoncavallo: The Social Construction of a Public Space of Proximity,” 09/2003 at [http://www.republicart.net/disc/realpublicspaces/membretti01\\_en.htm](http://www.republicart.net/disc/realpublicspaces/membretti01_en.htm). The five *House Magic* zines contain other stories from the squatting movements. See also the anthology of Nanni Balestrini, Primo Moroni, eds., *La Horda de oro 1968-1977 : la gran ola revolucionaria y creativa, política y existencial* (Traficantes de Sueños, 2006).

26 – Nicholas Mirzoeff, “The Right to Look,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Spring 2011), pp. 473-496; see also <http://nicholasmirzoeff.com/RTL/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/RTL-from-CI.pdf>. The dense prologue to this article contains useful connections to the Real Estate Show action: Mirzoeff’s “visuality” is not only the field of human regard, it is imbricated with the Carlylean notion of power, heroic authority which has the ability to see and determine the course of history. That’s the nobility; the rest of us, masses, commoners, are “mobility.” Thus seeing, and with it all technologies of vision (e.g., photography), has a clear relation to power. To see is the prerogative of power, and can be denied to the “mobility.” You don’t need to see; you don’t need to know. Mirzoeff: “I am not attributing agency to visuality but, as is now commonplace, treating it as a discursive practice for rendering and regulating the real that has material effects.” For him, then, the “right to look...spontaneously invents new forms” in order to evade the separations enforced by the visualities of authority. “It wants to separate right from law, as being a prior moment of formation, whether in the judicial process or the Lacanian law of the gaze” (Mirzoeff, p. 476). “It is the performative claim of a right to look where none technically exists that puts a countervisuality into play” (p. 478). Artists are all about looking.

27 – Curiously, I no longer feel that. I have been in so many “free spaces” and social centers in the last several years I have come to realize what should have been obvious from the start – these spaces are linked, and all together they constitute a new world of action with its own rules and regulations. The thrill of opening a new space almost immediately gives way to the hard work of running it.

28 – J. Martin Pedersen, “Property, Commoning and the Politics of Free Software,” *The Commoner*, no. 14 – Winter 2010, p. 18; online at <http://www.commoner.org.uk/N14/jmp-essay-full-the-commoner.pdf>.

29 – Nicholas Mirzoeff, “Occupy Theory” at <http://occupytheory.org/read/occupy-theory.html>; the “general will” quote comes from Mirzoeff’s “Occupy” blog, post “Jan. 3 [2012] Occupy Cultural Studies”; he is quoting Nick Couldry and Natalie Fenton, “Occupy: Rediscovering the General Will,” on the Social Science Research Council website.

30 – Pedersen cites this to Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (2008), p. 45.

31 – For this term, Pedersen cites Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (2006).

32 – “Occupy a Museum Near You! Noah Fischer in conversation with Joanna Warsza and Florian Malzacher,” website of the Berlin Biennale 2012, <http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/comments/occupy-a-museum-near-you-20371>; first published in *Camera Austria International* No 117, 2012 (Graz/Berlin); [www.camera-austria.at](http://www.camera-austria.at).

33 – The Reverend Daniel Berrigan appeared at Zucotti Park in New York City on the “Democracy Now” webcast news program, June 8, 2012.

# The Tompkins Square Community Center

by Susan Simensky-Bietila

I was living on East 2nd and Avenue B on the 5th floor of a walk-up tenement (a building which collapsed not long after I left). Our rent was \$60 a month. The bathtub was in the kitchen. It was a step up from our previous apartment, where the filthy toilet was down the hall and shared by the entire floor and there was no shower or tub at all. No escape from the roaches, but we happily left the bedbugs behind at our 11th Street and Avenue C apartment. My boyfriend Tom and I both grew up in housing projects in the impoverished East New York section of Brooklyn and having our own place was enough.

I had to look up and down the street before entering the building to make sure that no one was in position to follow after me to rob the little I had. I ran up each flight of stairs and paused to do my best to check the next landing for anyone in wait. Tom had a motorcycle and carried it upstairs with him for the night. Triple locks on the door and gates on the window did not stop an addict neighbor from busting the wall adjacent to the door and taking tools and sheets and absolutely everything. Even the tooth paste was gone.

After that, there were no major crises with our immediate neighbors, at least until soon after we left. Connie and Carlos lived on the 4th floor. Connie was taking a bath, the tub in the kitchen as ours was. Suddenly she found herself taking her bath on the 3rd floor. The floor had collapsed. No one was seriously injured. I guess more of that sort of thing must have happened, because when I went looking for the building a few years later, the building was gone.

The apartment was on 2nd Street, a few doors east of Avenue B, on the south side of the street. Our window looked out on Houston. Four tiny two-room apartments on each floor looked exactly like the ones in the Jacob Riis "How the Other Half Lives" photos. At least now there was a toilet in the apartment, but there was so little space around it, you had to be small to use it. After the break-in, with plaster everywhere, we decided to take down the rest of the plaster and exposed the brick and a small stone fireplace. We put a finishing seal on the brick and iron hooks to hang the pots and utensils. Tom built a loft bed with a desk and art table below. We threw the plaster and lathing strips off the fire escape and then cleaned it up from the back yard below.

There was a Cuban-Chinese restaurant on that corner – tasty, greasy food. Fried rice made with blood sausage. It smelled great, but we could rarely afford it. So we pooled

resources with neighbors on the 5th floor to have more exciting meals. We were also a seemingly incongruous mix, who lived together harmoniously. Arthur was from the Bronx, Chinese-American and also a New Left political activist. He grew up speaking Cantonese and was teaching himself Mandarin. He decided that I could learn along with him. At the time there was a theory that you could learn a language in your sleep, so we gave him a key and he played "Learning Mandarin Chinese" records while I slept. It didn't work. Arthur would shop in Chinatown and show up with good ingredients, but insisted that he didn't know how to cook. He carried in bags of food, ginger, Chinese cabbage, dried mushrooms, and sat himself down in the kitchen, cigarette in hand. He was perfectly able to tell me step-by-step what his mother would do to prepare these ingredients as I followed along, cooking the dinner.

The next apartment was Mickey and Eddie aka Micki and Edwina, 42nd Street drag queens. They were buddies who met in Elmira, their favorite prison. Mickey assumed the role of a doting Jewish mother, cooking me chicken soup when I was sick and gently carrying me cradled in his giant arms all the way to Bellevue emergency room, when I broke a bone in my foot. The fourth neighbor didn't mix with us. She was a very elderly Puerto Rican woman who didn't open her door, even when we tried to bring her food. I only saw her a few times when she sat on the fire escape and threw cans at police cars passing on Houston Street. And then she was taken away. So three apartments had weekly potluck dinners. Arthur bought prepared foods or drink.

We were living on Tom's Social Security disability checks. I worked some nights alone at the *New York Review of Books*, typing. My job was transcribing the Chicago Conspiracy Trial from court documents into the massive computer in preparation for its publication as a book. Then we both got mononucleosis and were laid up for months. We were diagnosed by Dr. June Finer, who ran a free clinic out of a trailer near Houston Street. We subsisted on the welfare food supplements. Tom had grown up eating these food surplus commodities – tasteless powdered milk, macaroni, rice, oatmeal, corn meal, cans of peanut butter, canned rough texture corn, blocks of yellow surplus American cheese, gristly generic Spam, flour and of course lard. If we had been Native American, we would have had the makings of fry bread. The only restaurant we could ever afford was Wo Hop on Bayard Street. Down in a basement, they had a 99 cent *lo mein*. A few blocks from the Tombs, it had long



Susan Simensky Bietila, *Bath at the Avenue B Apartment*, 1990, lithograph

been my celebration place, a convenient rendezvous when friends got bailed out after demonstration busts.

I had been on the art/production staff of the *Guardian* (radical newsweekly), on East 4th Street and then part of the *Rat* collective, women who took over the radical underground paper, having enough of exploitative sexist stereotyping and of being relegated to the subservient traditional female role. Participation by women as writers and artists had been consistently rejected by men claiming to be revolutionaries, not to speak of including women in positions of power such

as editors or theorists. I hand-lettered the first issue of *Rat* as well as many of the headlines over the year. I drew covers and illustrations and participated fully in collective editorial decisions. It was really wonderful until the beginnings of identity politics were used to fuel schisms.

I drifted away from the *Rat* collective during the second year. Competing 'more oppressed than thou', 'more revolutionary than thou' claims destroyed the joy of collectivity. 'Woman-identified-woman' defined heterosexuality as subservience to male authority and 'following Third World leadership'

became the dogma. I was poor and working class and that oppression was invisible and a priori unimportant to them. My own political ideas were no longer included in the mix. So I banded together with others like myself on the Lower East Side and in Brooklyn. We were interviewed on WBAI about being white and working-class in the movement and the show won awards. This positioned Tom and I to be summer replacements for a lunchtime call in anti-war show on WBAI radio. We continued to go to the demonstrations to free the Panther 21 as well as anti-Vietnam War and Womens Liberation actions. When we married at the Washington Square Methodist Church, the people who had just finished demonstrating to free the women of the Panther 21 at the Womens House of Detention arrived only a little late to our wedding to join the celebration. The pastor and most of the guests wore motorcycle boots and leather jackets, together with motorcycle helmets, routine protective gear from the swing of police batons and blackjack at demonstrations.

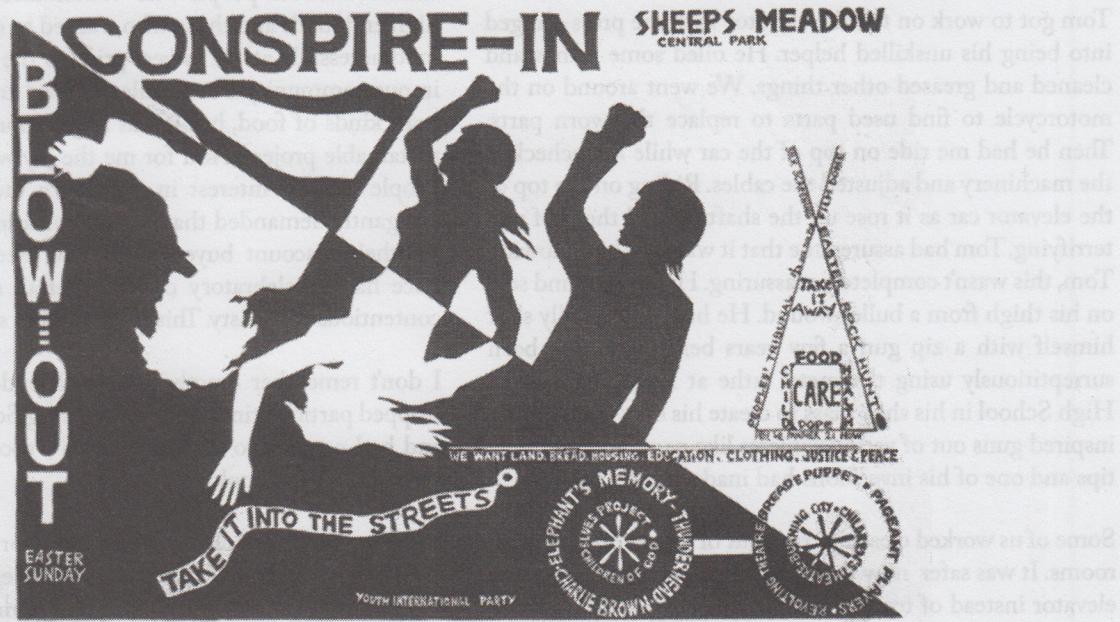
Tom had been an electrician's apprentice and then an elevator repairman's apprentice. A former room-mate of ours, just accepted to Cornell Law School was active in the NY Panther Defense Committee. He asked Tom to help put in electric wiring at the Panther Defense Committee office and assist a freelance inventor install an innovative system of burglar alarms. It was important to protect the files containing donors' identities from theft by government spies. The FBI was in the business of threatening the careers and reputations of wealthy or socially prominent donors to Panther Defense and other left movements. The alarms were perimeter alarms, protecting entry to the space but also alarms on the file cabinets and other objects. The alarm inventor told us that he and his girlfriend were part of a group starting a food-coop on the Lower East Side, near

where we lived, and invited us to get involved. We liked the idea of a food co-op politically and were pretty desperate to find a way to get food ourselves.

We went to a meeting to look at the space and found that it was a noble high-rise building on the east side of Tompkins Square Park, a place we walked past daily. The 16-story Christodora Building had been a Settlement House and then a Community Center with a pool, a gym, a library, workshops and kitchens. It was owned by the City, and had been vacant and locked since around 1956. It was built in 1928, and intended to be the Lower East Side's Community Center. The building had been recently liberated by neighborhood members of the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords Party who named it the Tompkins Square Community Center – reoccupied in the name of the community.

The entrance led into a high-ceilinged foyer and to the right was a small anteroom, furnished with discarded seats from cars with crates for coffee tables. It opened into the dimly lit parquet wood-floored gym, which was to become the site of the Food Co-op. Straight ahead from the main entrance foyer, and up the curved grand staircase there was a carpentry shop with lathes already humming. Louis, a skilled cabinetmaker, was working in rare woods. He had moved in his power tools and work tables. He was building joining zebrawood or mahogany into elegant tables and offering carpentry classes free to neighborhood youth.

The elevator had not moved in a very long time. I'm sure that Tom's offer to fix the elevator made us most welcome. His skills were valued and our politics were compatible. We signed up for Food Co-op work time and joined the effort to rehabilitate this wonderful space.



Susan Simensky Bietila, poster for the Yippies' Central Park Be-In, 1968, cut paper, pen and ink

The Food Co-op worked as follows: a team lined up a borrowed truck, and a rotating crew of volunteers went to Queens to the Hunts Point wholesale produce market during its pre-dawn hours once a week and returned with the truck full of produce – whatever was inexpensive and what people would likely want to eat. A larger group assembled to meet the truck and unload, and organize the food into recycled paper sacks to be sold by the bag full. Soon after on the same morning, the building was opened to the community for people to get the food – bargain prices for fresh produce. We expanded to canned goods and dry goods. We posted prices in English and Spanish on chalkboards. Initially, there was no storage as the building was infested with rodents and bugs. We bought metal trash cans to hold beans and rice. We got bacalao, dried salted codfish, a Caribbean staple. I don't recall if we were able to get refrigeration going. Maybe we got a few coolers.

Tom and I were among the first to fully explore the upstairs. Many rooms looked like they had been small offices. Pieces of the ceiling and walls had fallen onto scattered broken furniture parts. Plaster dust and long strips of business machine rolls of receipt paper, broken glass and pigeon shit littered the grey-green cracked linoleum tile floor. Many windows were broken so that especially on the upper floors, you felt cold air entering from one side of the building with a clear path to blow out the broken windows opposite. Despite so much of the building being pigeon habitat, I saw grand possibilities.

The intention was to turn the building into free space for community organizations and for free classes in various topics of interest. One of the first was a self-defense class taught by the burglar-alarm inventor. The plans were to gradually expand onto the higher floors.

Tom got to work on the elevator with me press-ganged into being his unskilled helper. He oiled some things and cleaned and greased other things. We went around on the motorcycle to find used parts to replace the worn parts. Then he had me ride on top of the car while he rechecked the machinery and adjusted the cables. Riding on the top of the elevator car as it rose up the shaft toward the roof was terrifying. Tom had assured me that it was safe, but knowing Tom, this wasn't completely reassuring. He had a round scar on his thigh from a bullet wound. He had accidentally shot himself with a zip gun a few years before. He had been surreptitiously using the metal lathe at Franklin K. Lane High School in his shop class to create his own James Bond inspired guns out of various objects like pens, and umbrella tips and one of his inventions had inadvertently fired.

Some of us worked clearing trash out of rooms on the upper rooms. It was safer now that it could be hauled down in the elevator instead of tossing it out the windows, but the task was enormous and not pressing. I did not spend much time on the upper floors again.

I don't remember most of the people involved, other than the inventor and his petite girlfriend who had a short Afro. I do remember Lena Powell, whose husband John was one of the Panther 21. She was active in the Food Co-op. Lena was from Sweden and she had two small children. And I remember Louis, the carpenter, who one of the few Puerto Rican members of the core group – warm and cheerful, burly build and calloused hands.

The core of the Food Co-op activists did not represent the diversity of the community as most of us were in our 20s, and few had children, but becoming representative and having the foods that most people wanted and could afford seemed obvious to us. Our purpose was to emulate the Panthers and the Young Lords and organize to "Serve the People". Although the building was "liberated" by the Panthers and Lords, they were not active in the Community Center or the Food Co-op. By the time I was involved, it seemed that they had opened the building and turned it over to the community. Many of the shoppers were older and Puerto Rican. We started to include more Puerto Rican staples like bacalao (dried salted codfish) and Goya canned products. We already carried platanos and began to buy rice and beans and jalapenos. Things were growing steadily and everything functioned well for a time.

Then a number of people from a new neighborhood demographic began to come to meetings. They wanted the co-op to order their "health foods". It was the early days of "organic". The new people were not poor. They were professionals who bought co-op apartments or apartments in renovated buildings which were starting to creep into the neighborhood. We never expected to be taken over. Meetings full of friction soured the experience. It was a class conflict between people who wanted discount on prices for high end foods and those who wanted to make quality fresh food accessible at the lowest price to the poor and hungry in our community. For awhile we tried compromise, doing both kinds of food, but it was much more work and not a sustainable project. And for me the joy was gone. The new people had no interest in creating a utopian model, but arrogantly demanded that our organization be put to work for their discount buyers' club. The meetings which had once had a celebratory communitarian spirit had turned contentious and nasty. This class conflict soured the group.

I don't remember exactly how it all ended because I just stopped participating. I started Nursing School in Brooklyn and had no time to spare. Tom and I soon broke up and I moved back to Brooklyn.

I soon joined Medical Committee for Human Rights ("Health Care is a Right, Not a Privilege") and became what is now called a street medic at demonstrations. And in all the years since, I have continued to be involved in projects which "serve the people".

# Christodora: The Flight of a Sea Animal

by Yuri Kapralov

An inquiry into the rise and fall of one of the finest settlement houses in urban America. Christodora House on Avenue B, established in 1887 as The Young Women's Settlement House and later known in the neighborhood as the "Little House by the Side of the Road."

Frozen Stiff During Summer Heat Wave

(One version of an introduction)

Oh boy, it's now ninety-six degrees and still rising. Not a single leaf moves above us, not one pigeon, not one squirrel. The dogs lie ominously quiet, perhaps they are already boiled. Even the concrete of our chess tables is hot. The tall cans of Rolling Rock which we buy at the Arab bodega on Avenue A become undrinkable in exactly seven minutes. The men and women sitting at the tables across from us are drinking blackberry brandy, washing it down with rum and Coke. They are playing Hearts. We are playing chess, not too seriously. Our special little oasis, the chess tables near Avenue B, is a place where dreams and hopes are long lost and forgotten. We are exhausted Bedouins sitting under a pyramid of sorts--- Christodora House on Avenue B.

It is still by far the tallest building in our sea of tenements. To me, it will always remain a mystery. A proud monument to noble aspirations. Built to serve the poor, now accommodating the rich. This pyramid, perhaps more than anything else, reflects the changes in the East Village, a neighborhood I love and have lived in for many years. Looking at it, I realize that it will be casting its shadow over the park long after I am gone. And the future Bedouins will be sitting in our oasis, wondering.

For us, this is the final encampment. We've run out of places to go. This is it, and the air is gray. A strangling curtain of gray lace. It's harder and harder to breathe. We try not to move, but we must. We are playing chess, after all. We have to make our moves. On the patches of dry grass behind our benches rest the relative newcomers to Tompkins Park---the homeless. To me, they are defeated and wounded soldiers, prisoners of war behind impenetrable barbed wire. Although I am a Bedouin, I feel kinship with them. Especially in the cold sweat of sleepless nights when I attempt to climb the barbed fences of my own concentration camps.

It reaches ninety-eight degrees. We are not zombies yet. We are reasonably intelligent beings. We sometimes talk politics.

One young, black guy next to me who lives in the Men's Shelter and speaks Russian quite fluently sums up the policy of Glasnost and tells us a few Russian anecdotes. No one really pays much attention. My chess opponent is a Chinese scholar and translator. He is a white man, a former hippie who recently sent the daughter he had with a black woman to an upstate college. He strokes his long reddish beard and thoughtfully explains the current trends of Chinese literature. We pretend to be listening but our thoughts are on something else. Now that we seem to be surviving through this afternoon, we wonder: what about tonight? We dread it.

It's an all-consuming fear. Are we going to make it?

As soon as I close my eyes and try to relax, the projectionist starts running my reels again. Faster and faster. The years are out of sequence. Who cares? I don't. One summer my dog would die, another summer my son would grow up and walk away down the melting pavement. Why walk? Why walk away? Oh, yes, today the streets are also melting. My eyes are open. I do remember that everything in the East Village begins and ends on street level. It was like that in the misty, idealistic '60s when I first moved here and sat with thousands of hippies right where the homeless now sleep. We listened to Jefferson Airplane playing from the bandshell. All through the fires and muggings and the heroin of the '70s to the present-- our empty, deadly '80s. This one thing never changed. People still find their friends, their wives, their dogs and cats, their lovers, their books. Once I found a lady's gold watch in an envelope stuck into an old book thrown out on Avenue A. People get ripped off and drink their Colt 45 and Night Train Express and buy their drugs and do whatever is necessary to ease their pain. Sometimes, they die on street level. Enough. I make my move and realize I made a fatal error. I drink my beer and watch my opponent. He is in no hurry to finish me off. He lets me off the hook. Then we finish our lukewarm beer. The heat is finally getting to me. My mind keeps spinning even with my eyes wide open. Yet I know I am frozen. I am on a snow-covered steppe north of Stavropol, a frightened Russian boy, barely alive, listening to the thunder of artillery fire. I look across the table. I look sideways. All of us here in this park are frozen. Frozen in time and space and some of us are already dead. Sure, the chess pieces we are playing with belonged to Paul, our writer friend who used to walk in a funny way, so open and naive. In his apartment, he used to stack newspapers until they reached the ceiling. Not just any newspapers but *The Wall Street Journal*. Why? Nobody knew. There were at least 10 million cockroaches in

his place. You couldn't even sit down. Paul was the greatest bartender at Max's Kansas City until he had a stroke. And for quite a few years, he sat frozen with us. He is long gone now, but we still play with his chess set. Paul's typewriter, his only valuable possession, was given to me. And it still types, as far as I know. I gave it to another writer. So many writers here and not enough typewriters. Another friend's system broke down, and he left to die near his parents, someplace in the Midwest. What's left? An unfinished canvas, a few pieces of furniture, a dog and a cat.

Our oasis itself is frozen. Only minor changes occur. Someone nods until his head hits the concrete chess table. Someone walks to the bodega to get more cold beer. Someone goes behind the tree and takes a leak. Our chess tables are very special. So different from the rest of the park. The realities of life don't matter here. Never did. We listen to a man from Ecuador talk about his village and the earth there, so fertile you plant a seed and in three days, it grows into a bush. We've heard his story many times before. It's the only story he knows. A couple of tables away, the elderly Ukrainians talk about sunflowers and the earth of their dreams. That's the only problem we have. Our spinning minds. The projectionist has gone berserk. Our reels run with the speed of twenty thousand frames per second. And it's ninety-eight degrees. I look at another summer, one of the years that stretch into centuries. The afternoon sun is reflecting in the shattered windows of Christodora House. I watch myself climbing old stairs and roofs. I walk precariously on planks made from two-by-fours. I climb through a broken, boarded-up window. I am inside the Pyramid. It's a long walk to the top floor. What a view. I am astounded.

I stand there for an hour, at least. Then I walk down through endless rooms and mountains of bottles and cans and hypodermic needles and women's purses ripped open. I see a giant black hole where the elevators once were. There are weird noises. I want to leave as soon as I can. I walk through what was once a magnificent oak-paneled library with a huge fireplace. Many piles of partially burned books lie on the floor. I pick one up. "Poetry is a journal kept by a sea animal living on land and wanting to fly the air." Perhaps this amazing building, this pyramid, had been such an animal all along. I think I should at least try to reconstruct its journal.

I see myself going insane for the next couple of years, talking to dozens of old-timers, sitting in libraries, sorting out the who, what, when, and how, and trying to answer some of the why. Thank God I did it when I wasn't entirely frozen. I ask the projectionist to rerun this part of my reel a bit slower. The projectionist reminds me that every morning during the summers, a handsome elderly black gentleman with a long silvery beard carries his bag of laundry into the park toilet. He washes his belongings in the sink and hangs everything on the fence to dry. He sits next to it with his eyes closed. Once his laundry dries, he folds it neatly and

leaves the park. He never speaks to anyone. And why should he? He is the Great Pharaoh. In his native ancient Egypt, he has seen many groups of colorfully dressed, bearded architects spread out their plans for his pyramid.

In the East Village, just before the turn of the century, in August of 1887 to be precise, two very unlikely architects, both young women, began building their pyramid. They began, just as everything in the East Village begins and ends, then and now, on street level in a storefront: 167 Avenue B. Outside their door, they put a simple wooden sign: YOUNG WOMEN'S SETTLEMENT HOUSE---EVERYONE IS WELCOME.

### The Early Settlement

Walking through the burned-out sections of the East Village between Avenues B and D, it is very difficult to imagine that at the turn of the century over 4,000 people lived on each and every one of these devastated and mostly empty blocks.

When you add all the thousands of horses, pigs, chickens, sheep, cows, geese, goats, and dogs, every square foot of space was used. So were the alleys, roofs, basements, and streets. The density was unreal. The area was landfill over a swamp. Swarms of mosquitoes were so thick that horses would collapse from sheer loss of blood when left unattended. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people were dying each year from malaria alone. God only knows how many died from other diseases and hunger.

From 1881 through 1889 close to six million immigrants from Europe and Turkey arrived in New York. About one third of them settled on the Lower East Side for a period of ten years or more.

The nation could not easily absorb this flow of humanity. There were intense debates in Congress and everywhere in the country for and against immigration. The opposing views changed little over the following decades. Even today, one could substitute the dates and nationalities of the immigrants and hear the same arguments. For example, writing in the 1883 issue of the *North American Review*, Honorable W. B. Chandler (Chairman of the Senate Committee on Immigration) states that, "We cannot safely undertake the assimilation of the ignorant and debased human beings who are tending toward us." He also raises the familiar question of whether other countries were sending us their criminal and "low life element" so that we could feed and care for them. Cautiously arguing against the suspension of immigration, Senator Henry Hansbrough of North Dakota wrote in the same issue: "The strong, healthy and honest immigrant brings more than the paltry dollars in his pockets." Nevertheless, Frederick Knapp (Commissioner of Immigration of the State of New York) placed a definite economic value of \$1,125 on each immigrant. And the debates continued.



Christodora House (photo by Americasroof, Wikipedia, "Christodora House"). Wikipedia writes, "Though it was operational at one point the swimming pool and gymnasium are no longer in use. Zoning for these facilities stipulated 'community access,' and they have been left in a state of disrepair, until the building management can reverse the zoning."



Robert Goldman (aka Bobby G.),  
*El Coco Que Habla*, 1982, paint on canvas

To the average new immigrant who had just given away his last penny and all his valuable icons, rings, or silverware to various immigration officials as bribes to get off Ellis Island, such high appraisal would seem a cruel joke.

It was very difficult to survive on the Lower East Side in 1893. For the young immigrant woman, life was a continuing nightmare.

Aside from getting married, she had three basic choices. If she was pretty she could become a prostitute. If she was strong, she could work in a sweatshop or as a maid. If she did not have these qualities, she could become a nun.

There was also the East River, the gas stoves, and the roofs of the tenements. Many young women chose those routes, too.

It was against this background that two young women, Christine McCall and Sara Carson, pulled together their meager resources, barely enough to cover a month's rent, and took a three-room flat and an unfinished storefront at 167 Avenue B between Tenth and Eleventh streets. This was the site of the original Young Women's Settlement House, known in the neighborhood later as the Little House by the Side of the Road. It opened its doors in the summer of 1887.

Miss McCall, a slight, intense woman in her late twenties, had been a YWCA worker uptown. Both she and her friend, Sara Carson, were active in the Suffrage movement. The Settlement House they founded was unique in several ways. First, there were no other Settlement Houses in the area (the nearest was the University Settlement on Eldridge Street). Second, although it was non-denominational, it followed a grass roots Christian philosophy. Third, its work was restricted to young immigrant women, their parents, and children. Many programs that originated at the Young Women's Settlement became models for social programs nationwide some 60 years later. After-school daycare programs for working mothers; women's awareness groups, a program providing medical and psychiatric help for

unwed mothers; even services to make the tenement flats more livable for single women. They also pioneered sending social workers to city jails to tutor illiterate children, 10 to 14 years of age, who were imprisoned.

This program was very important because there were thousands (some estimates range over ten thousand) such children in prisons or in the so-called "work camps." Some of these children were actually executed for crimes ranging from ordinary burglary to murder. In cases involving these children, miscarriage of justice was the rule rather than the exception. The needs of all people of the neighborhood gradually changed the primary purpose of the Settlement House, and the programs within it became more generalized. When the House moved into a large three-story brownstone on Avenue A and Ninth Street, it became somewhat like the Henry Street Settlement, a cultural/social/educational community center. Its social program was still a priority but, as time went on, it was eclipsed by the new cultural programs. The Settlement now had an established music school with over 250 students, a glee club, a theater club. There were citizenship classes for adults, dances, concerts, lectures and poetry readings by the members of its famous Poetry Guild.

On March 21, 1914, one of the more promising students of its Music School, George Gershwin, age 15, gave his first public concert. The reviews were mixed. George's brother, Ira, was active in the glee club and Poetry Guild. That Poetry Guild, which boasted the smallest theater in America (rear bedroom, their "Magic Casements"), produced not only some of the great American poets, but a whole string of popular novelists, Jerome Weidman among them, who often used the Settlement House as a background for their novels. Some of the biggest names in film and theater, producers and actors (Edward G. Robinson and Tony Curtis among them) were in the theater club. An estimated 5,000 people visited the Little House by the Side of the Road, as it was sometimes affectionately called, every week.

During the summer, hundreds of kids went to their Bound Brook Camp in New Jersey or spent weekends as guests of Mrs. Arthur Curtiss James on her vast estate in Tarrytown. Mrs. James was the institution's president and Chairman of its Board of Managers. A lot of money began flowing into various Settlement House activities.

Toward the mid-'20s, the neighborhood changed completely. So, once again, did the emphasis of the Settlement's work. Miss McCall stepped down as Director and Herbert Beal was brought in. The main activities were now the Music School, the adult citizenship classes, the Boy Scouts (Troop 202 was stationed there), and the Nature clubs. Many of the meaningful social programs were quietly dropped. There developed a kind of wall between the Settlement and the community it served. A couple of scandals involving

some staff workers and local women further alienated the neighborhood.

Jerome Weidman describes the settlement in one of his novels as "an outpost of the Uptown world planted in their midst, an oasis founded and operated by strangers for reasons never quite understood and trusted by their beneficiaries."

These strangers included some super-wealthy and powerful people. Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Curtiss James had given the Settlement its three-story brownstone in the first place and were now committed to building a huge 18-story building on its site. It would be the largest Settlement House ever built in America.

### The Super Rich

Arthur Curtiss James and his wife, the former Harriet Eddie Parsons, were not merely super rich, but the absolute cream of the crop of New York society. Mr. James, a railroad tycoon, financier, and owner of several huge companies, was estimated to be worth 300 million dollars in the mid-'20s---he was in the class of J.P. Morgan and the Rockefellers. He lived in a twelve-story mansion on Millionaires' Row at 998 Fifth Avenue. There was a mansion of equal magnitude in Newport, Rhode Island, and an estate in Tarrytown, New York. During World War I, Mrs. James, always a civic-minded lady and from all accounts a very sensitive person as well, entertained over 1,200 soldiers on some weekends at their Tarrytown estate. Mr. James was eccentric and contradictory, as idiosyncratic in some respects as Howard Hughes. He was an avid yachtsman. He sailed across the Atlantic, down the Nile and the White Nile. He was an art collector with tastes ranging from the English masters (George Romney, Joshua Reynolds) to Touraine tapestries and Roman sarcophaguses in which, it was rumored, he liked to take a nap from time to time.

He was also a great and intelligent philanthropist in his time and was active in his church, the First Presbyterian on Fifth Avenue and Eleventh Street. He was active in politics. His support was valued highly by the mayor, the governor, as well as those in the Senate and White House.

His favorite charities were as diverse as his art collection. He gave to the Metropolitan Museum (he was a trustee), the Union Theological Seminary, and a wide range of unrelated organizations in between. It was his wife who interested him in the work of the Young Women's Settlement House and the Christodora House.

For a time, he became obsessed with poverty and the Settlement's work. One of the legends was that he used to park his Packard north of 14th Street and, dressed as a pushcart peddler, walk down Avenue B to his Settlement House, talking to people along the way. He would later sit at a meeting of the Board of Managers and astound everyone with his knowledge of the neighborhood and its problems.

When the new Christodora House was dedicated to him in December of 1928, Mr. James admitted to his friends that he considered it his greatest achievement. In the '30s, he must have felt the depression. He sold his Fifth Avenue mansion to move into a smaller six-story townhouse at 39 East 69th Street. This townhouse was called one of the most elegant in the city by several newspapers and periodicals. In 1931, Mrs. James became an invalid. She died ten years later. Mr. James died the following month.

The couple had no children. The estate was divided in accordance with Mr. James's will between numerous relatives and friends. The James Foundation was set up to continue charitable work. The principal benefactors were the Christodora Foundation and the YMCA. About a dozen other organizations received lesser amounts of the foundation's shares. It was a very complicated arrangement. The James Foundation was set up for a period of 25 years. It apparently ceased to function in the mid-'60s. The Christodora Foundation still exists. It was after a long conversation with Mr. Steven Slobodin, the present director of the Christodora Foundation, that I decided to do some serious research for this book.

### The Pyramid

To people living in lower Manhattan, this building is a familiar sight. For decades, it stood abandoned. Among other firsts, the building had the dubious distinction of being the first slum skyscraper. I suspect that the reason it wasn't torn down was that nobody knew how to do it. Like a pyramid, it was built to last forever.

In 1928, it officially opened as the new Christodora House, replacing the Little House at the Side of the Road. It was then, and is now, a true palace amidst the tenements of the East Village. It was built on a floating foundation---an architectural first. It had everything. A large swimming pool, a gymnasium with parquet floors and handball court, a concert hall that held three hundred people, a restaurant, and a solarium. The library was paneled in oak and had a large working fireplace. Early American furniture bought at Sloane's was installed throughout the entire building. A few masterpieces from the legendary Arthur Curtiss James art collection hung in the lobby and in the classrooms of the Music School. It was indeed the biggest Settlement House ever built in America.

The new Christodora House was a gift from Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Curtiss James. It cost them almost two million dollars to erect it. In 1928, that was a lot of cash. During the years that followed, it became the in place for New York society figures to visit and donate money to. Long lines of Rolls Royces, Packards and Cadillacs were observed parked on East Ninth Street near the side entrance. The neighborhood children, barefoot and dressed in rags, often besieged the car occupants and chauffeurs, begging for pennies. Although the Settlement's work went on during

those years, the activities, instead of expanding, began to contract. The importance of the Residence Club for young men and women occupying the upper floors was stressed.

Handsome advertising flyers from the Christodora Residence Club detailed "elegant living," convenience and good service. The rates were from \$7 to \$10 a week; \$1.50 a day for transients. Breakfast and supper were included. The guests also had the use of the swimming pool, gymnasiums, the library and the solarium. No tipping was allowed throughout the building.

The people occupying the Residence Club were mostly young executives, teachers, legal secretaries, doctors, nurses and New York University graduate students with trust funds. The yuppies of that time. There were no neighborhood people living in the building, but cleaning women and other low-paid help were recruited from the area.

During World War II, the building housed some refugees from Nazi Germany on a very select basis: professors, lawyers, journalists, scientists, etc.

For a very brief time after the war, some upper floors were used to house (under armed guard) Soviet citizens, primarily prisoners of war from Fort Dix who refused to go back to Russia. Under the Yalta agreement, they were to be forcibly repatriated to the Soviet Union anyway. This was done in total secrecy. No member of the Settlement's staff knew the details or purpose of this operation. In the summer of 1946, two of these prisoners jumped out of the windows of Christodora House. One died, the other managed to escape. There were eyewitnesses, but the incident was not reported in any of the New York papers. The operation moved elsewhere immediately afterward.

What transpired in 1947 has all the elements of mystery, suspense, political intrigue, and human drama. It makes today's anti-poverty rip-offs seem like child's play. The city fathers suddenly decided that what the city needed was a Youth Detention Facility. They thought the Christodora House would be perfect for that purpose. Christodora leadership at that time was floundering. The city made an offer for the building which was difficult to resist: \$2.6 million in cash and adequate space in the newly constructed Jacob Riis housing complex on Avenue D. The only catch was that the Settlement had to go to two buildings: one on Eighth Street and one on Tenth Street along Avenue D. It was a most devious offer.

A big split developed among the Christodora Board of Managers. The conservative faction with whom the director, Mr. Beal, was thought to be aligned, argued for the sale, citing the ever-rising maintenance costs and rising deficits (the Residence Club was not paying for itself). The liberals argued that leaving the building and going to another neighborhood would be a terrible blow to a community served so long and

with such dedication by the Settlement staff. Still another group of managers, the realists, tried to convince city officials that it would simply be too costly to convert the building into, basically, a jail. The Board of Managers rejected the city offer by a slim majority. Then the city pulled a fast one. They came in and condemned the entire building, citing some minor violations. This was a sham, of course. The building was in fine shape. At the next board meeting, after intensive maneuvering, the realists caved in. The city's offer was accepted and the Settlement House moved soon thereafter to two locations on Avenue D. After the city took possession of the building, they conducted an extensive study and found that what the realists were telling them was true. Converting the building to a secure facility would indeed be too costly.



Anton van Dalen, *The Positive Show*, 1981

So they decided to build the Youth Detention Center from scratch in the Bronx (on Spofford Avenue). However, they were now stuck with an empty skyscraper.

Enter all the elements of a Marx Brothers movie. Incredibly, the city offered to sell the building back to the Christodora House. The same officials who only a few months before were trying to push the Settlement House out, were running around begging and pressuring the Board members into buying back the building. Only it just wasn't possible for the Settlement House to move back for many reasons.

A big scandal was in the making. The city had to do something, and fast. First, they clamped the lid of secrecy over the entire matter. Some of their records vanished; some were falsified; key officials were quietly shifted to other boroughs.

The city then moved a unit of the Welfare Department, called the Department of Employment and Training, into the building. It was an unadulterated whitewash to get the reporters from the *Journal American*, who were close to cracking the story, off the scent. That welfare "operation" was a "paper operation," but the woman in charge of it was an able, seasoned, and crafty bureaucrat. She wrote glowing,

reports about her achievements. In time, everyone forgot that the building was virtually empty. As far as the city was concerned, it was used to full capacity.

The woman in charge was also farsighted enough not to allow anyone from the neighborhood into the building. The use of the gymnasiums and the pool were now denied to local kids. She would even order that the donated used clothing be burned rather than distribute it to the local poor. Some residents say she feared that clothing donated by the uptown whites would fall into the hands of the Puerto Ricans and blacks who were moving into the area.

Neighborhood people, as well as community groups, knew that there was nothing happening in the building. In 1951, St. Brigit's Church, a large Catholic congregation in the community, decided to offer the city one million dollars with the idea of using part of the Christodora building to replace its ancient and overcrowded parochial school. The city indignantly refused the offer since they still pretended that the building was being used. So the Welfare Department "operation" worked out of the nearly empty building for over six years. Eventually, someone in the city looked at the maintenance costs and was horrified. The city quietly closed the building and retired the "dedicated public servant" who ran her "paper operation." The building remained closed for over ten years. It was, however, in very good shape and everything in it was working. It was a ship in mothballs.

### The Displaced Settlement House

After moving from the Avenue B building, the Christodora Settlement House was in a new neighborhood. It was also now divided into two parts: two floors of the Jacob Riis housing complex on 10th Street and Avenue D, and almost three floors on Eighth Street and Ave. D. The Jacob Riis housing complex was originally built for the returning World War II veterans and their families, but even as early as 1947, it already had a sizeable welfare population, many of whom were elderly.

There were strong tenant organizations in the crowded housing complex who resented the free space that the city had allocated to the Settlement and immediately demanded meaningful programs from its staff.

These demands were for improving services to the elderly women in particular, establishing expanded daycare facilities for preschoolers, after-school tutoring for public and private school children, expansion of their daycare and summer camp facilities, hiring of neighborhood residents, and so on.

The floundering and somewhat demoralized leadership of the Christodora House, not used to any demands from the politically naive community around Tompkins Square Park, was further demoralized and divided by this unexpected and strong pressure.

They shifted the main focus back to social problems. The music school was closed. A few arts-related programs were also dropped. They expanded their summer camp and daycare facilities. But the demands continued.

In an effort to expand their area of service, they acquired a brownstone on 151 Avenue B, two doors from their old building, and the former Recreation Rooms Settlement on First Street near First Avenue.

They departed from their former philosophy and trained and hired social workers who were community residents.

According to one former Christodora social worker whom I interviewed, the problem was partly their inertia, their unwillingness to promote outreach into the community. That worker thought it originated with their director, Mr. Beal, who appeared to be a remote and inaccessible man, trying to run the settlement as if it were a business. With Mr. Slobodin assuming the directorship of the Christodora House in 1958, the Settlement experienced a brief renaissance. There were, however, many new factors on the Lower East Side scene. The neighborhood changed radically, once again. There was a large influx of Puerto Rican and Slavic immigrants. The veterans in Jacob Riis housing project moved out. It became housing for people on welfare and other forms of public assistance. New York City's social services had improved considerably. Some of their social programs were the exact duplicates of Christodora's former programs. Many Christodora workers began working for the city.

When the Mobilization for Youth project (MFY) was launched on the Lower East Side by Henry Street Settlement and five other Settlement Houses, including the Christodora House, the Board of Managers expressed concern that they were in direct competition with one of the projects they had helped to launch. The decision was made to get out of the city altogether and put their efforts into their Bound Brook Summer Camp activities. They argued that federal, state, and city governments, who were now supporting youth activities in the ghettos of the inner cities, did not give any support to summer camps or activities, leaving it to private foundations, like the Christodora House. Presently, the Christodora Foundation supports three summer camps for city kids in northern New Jersey. Whether the decision to leave the East Village was the right one or a cop-out, the departure of the Settlement House left a great void in our East Village community. It certainly contributed to the neighborhood's rapid deterioration, especially east of Avenue B. I have tried not to rely too much on just the available research material. I have found some of the newspaper and magazine accounts pertaining to the Christodora House to be misleading, or downright erroneous. The *New York Times* for example, made basic errors in its 1928 article; and then again in 1969 and 1971.

Personal accounts give a more accurate picture. A seventy-year-old Vista volunteer working in the area remembered living at the Christodora Residence Club at the time Hitler invaded Norway. A Ukrainian woman who worked as a maid in the same residence recalled some fascinating details of day-to-day operations of the House. And many others shared their memories: A local businessman who played basketball in the old brownstone and belonged to their famous 202 Boy Scout troop. Several former teachers and social workers. A former World War II veteran who organized their "One to One" Club working with retarded children. A well-known composer who went to their music school. An actor who vividly remembers their Christmas and Halloween celebrations, and who learned to swim in the Christodora pool. Several mothers who had children enrolled in various activities. A former welfare official. A Russian soldier who was held there briefly after World War II and escaped before he could be forcibly repatriated to the Soviet Union. A retired Italian city sanitation worker who was born next door to the original Young Women's Settlement (167 Avenue B), and many more.

So far, I have interviewed over thirty people, including the current director and administrator of the Christodora Fund, Mr. Steven Slobodin. I have plans to interview about a dozen more people whose lives have been touched in some way by this unique Settlement House. Actor Tony Curtis's entire life was changed when he was brought to the Settlement House as a juvenile delinquent, and fell under the influence of Paul Schwartz. Paul was one of the House's best social workers, and he introduced Tony to the Theatre Club. The dead characters are just as important as the living. People like Christine Isobel McCall and Sara Libby Carson; Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Curtiss James; Dr. Stanton Coit and Lillian Wald; George and Ira Gershwin; Jacob Riis and Jane Addams; Bird C. Coler and Henry Pelton; Commissioner Rhatigan and Mayor O'Dwyer; Mrs. Roosevelt and Mrs. Hall; Governor Dewey and Governor Harriman; and Moise, the famous doorman, handyman and jack-of-all-trades at both the old and new houses.

### **The Radicals Take Over Tompkins Square Community Center**

This particular period I remember only too well. Actually, I was only peripherally involved with the Tompkins Square Community Center (TSCC), helping out with their food co-op in the late '60s. But many of my friends, both radicals and simple people trying to help our already disintegrating community, were deeply involved in running the center. Some of the radicals who were young then are still making headlines. People involved in the Brinks job, Joanne Chesimard, Antony La Borde, Donald Weems; just about all of the Who's Who of the black/white radical establishment was at one time or another inside the Christodora House, which they controlled for four years.

Many plots against "imperialist Amerik-k-ka" were hatched in the building. Some, such as one to kidnap Lyndon Johnson, were too fantastic to go beyond the talking stage. Others, such as the "Panthers 21" plot to blow up the Statue of Liberty, have received nationwide attention and resulted in trials, frame-ups, convictions, reversals, and so on. There might have been a large cache of weapons hidden in the building, probably in the flooded sub-basement. The infamous .9mm pistols, some sub-machine guns, grenades and probably some plastic explosives. It's hardly a coincidence that after the radicals had finally been evicted from the building, patrolmen Rocco and Laurie were massacred with .9mm pistols on the corner of 11th Street and Avenue B, only two blocks from the Christodora House. "Evicted" in this case is not exactly the right word. I recall vividly hundreds of Tactical Force police in battle gear surrounding the building, positioning themselves on nearby rooftops. A helicopter buzzed near the Christodora roof, its machine gun trained on the building. Avenue B and East Ninth Street were closed to traffic. All the people in Tompkins Square Park were forced to leave. The park was sealed off completely.

From the roof of my building on Seventh Street and Avenue B, a couple of friends and I watched this doomsday scenario unfold. We were led to believe by local radical mouthpieces that there were four hundred teenagers inside who had sworn to defend the building to their death. They were prepared to fight room by room and then blow themselves up, rather than surrender to "the pigs." It was supposed to be another Stalingrad. Everyone anticipated a huge battle.

We did see what looked like machine gun barrels sticking out of the top floor windows. The loudspeakers blared back and forth as various city officials scurried around the building trying to negotiate something. Suddenly the loudspeaker stopped.

There was a brief battle. Later, one of the kids who was inside told me what happened in detail. From my roof, we could see the helicopter drop a few tear gas grenades into the upper windows. A platoon of cops stormed the building from the roof of P.S. 64. Simultaneously, another unit burst through the front door. I saw a group of about a dozen frightened teenagers run out from the side entrance with their hands in the air. They were handcuffed quickly and hustled into a bus waiting along East Ninth Street. Then the cops led a few men and women, some of whom were screaming, out of the building. The adults were not handcuffed. They seemed to be arguing with the police and city brass. There were a few cops left by the entrance, but the radical era was definitely over. The next morning, city workers boarded up the doors. This happened in 1972 and the building remained shut for fourteen years.

The radical era began with the Lindsay administration in 1966. When Lindsay was sworn in as Mayor, the East Village from

14th Street to Houston Street, and Avenue A to Avenue D was a cohesive, bustling neighborhood with a mixed lower-income population. There were over two thousand small businesses owned and operated mostly by local residents. Along Avenues C and D, there were many vegetable markets, butcher shops, fish stores, dozens of bakeries, clothing stores, shoe stores and shoe repair shops, pharmacies, delis, candy stores, restaurants and even small toy factories. Anything and everything could be bought and sold. In terms of quality of life, 1966 wasn't so bad. There was practically no crime and no abandoned or burned-out buildings. The children were safe even in the public schools. There was little racial or ethnic animosity, mainly because all the working poor were from many ethnic and racial backgrounds. There were about fifteen hundred people living on each block. Puerto Ricans and Slavs (Polish, Russian, Ukrainian and Carpatho Russians) comprised the major population, followed closely by Bohemians, Jews, Blacks and Albanians. There were still a few small Irish and Italian enclaves. Rent was cheap. In just a few years, an average family could save enough money to move to Greenpoint, Brooklyn or New Jersey. Many of the people, especially the elderly, did not want to move anywhere. They had their friends and relatives right in the neighborhood. It was their small village.

Actually, the area was more like a town. It also served the sprawling Jacob Riis and Lillian Wald housing complexes between Avenue D and FDR Drive. This not-so-little town became one of America's Hiroshimas, destroyed by human greed and the corruption of "poverty-pimp" politics first introduced by Mr. Lindsay. I and many of my friends living in the area had voted for him in 1965.

As we watched our community being destroyed during his administration, the truth of one proverb often came to mind: "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."

The intentions were great. Community control, an infusion of massive anti-poverty funds into the area to create new youth

projects, rehabilitation of the old tenements, and many other plans. The only problem was that the Lindsay administration commissioners in charge of these various great projects were like Lindsay himself—wealthy, white, liberal politicians. They were unaware of the fact that in addition to Blacks and Puerto Ricans, there were also poor whites living in New York. In our area of the East Village, these poor Whites accounted for over 60 percent of the population.

Everything the Lindsay administration introduced was done on a racial basis. It did not work even in predominantly Puerto Rican and Black areas, such as the South Bronx and Williamsburg. In the East Village, it was a disaster.

Let me give a mild example of how such a policy worked at the street level. Two teenagers I knew lived in the same house on my block for at least ten years. One was Polish and one Puerto Rican. Every year the two of them got summer jobs with the Parks Department. In 1966, the Puerto Rican kid got the job but the Polish kid did not because he was white. When he got home, his Puerto Rican friend suggested that he change his name from Robert to Roberto and the ending of his last name from -ski to -oz. He did and got the job. But this story has no happy ending. The seeds of racism...

[Editor's note: This is where the article ends, Mr. Kapralov passed away before he was able to finish this piece, or the book he planned on expanding it into.]

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Reprinted from Clayton Patterson, Joe Flood, Alan Moore, Howard Seligman, editors, *Resistance: A Social and Political History of the Lower East Side* (Seven Stories Press, NY, 2007)



# Yuri Kapralov, a 'grandfather' of E.V. counterculture

by Sarah Ferguson

East Village bohemians lost an elder statesman with the death on Aug. 27 of noted artist and author Yuri Kapralov. He had a stroke after being ill for some time with liver disease. He was 73.

A Russian immigrant who came to New York as a refugee of World War II, Kapralov was a formative artist. Though he never attained any lasting fame, his works — which included abstract paintings, sculptures and constructions made of found materials — were featured in group shows alongside artists like Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. He also wrote hundreds of poems and short stories and published several acclaimed books, including *Castle Dubrava*, a modern-day vampire novel set in Transylvania, which the *Los Angeles Times* called “full-bloodied and sexy,” and *Once There Was a Village*, his quintessential homage to the East Village of the 1960s and early 1970s, which remains one of the most haunting and evocative portraits of the neighborhood at that time.

Kapralov also fathered two daughters and a son through three tumultuous marriages, drove a cab and bartended at long-gone East Village joints like the Kiwi and the Frog Pond, wrote ads and taught art to runaways, homesteaded a building, ran a gallery, drank way too much and advised many a young rebel not to take life too seriously.

His own life was framed by tragedy. Born in Stavropol, Russia, on March 7, 1933, Kapralov was violently uprooted at age 12 when the Germans carpet-bombed his village in the North Caucasus Mountains during World War II. Separated from his mother (who may have died in the bomb attack) and his father, an army lieutenant who was off fighting in the war, Kapralov and the other villagers were rounded up and taken to work on a German farm — a life he called “one step above a concentration camp. If the Americans did not break through, we all would have died of hunger and hard work,” he once remarked in an interview.

In 1949, he was shipped off to the U.S. with a boatload of “displaced persons” and brought to work on a Vermont farm with other youth “orphaned” by the war. Then 16, Kapralov rebelled at performing what he called “slave labor” for the farmer, and instead fled with a group of Russian kids to Nyack, N.Y., where they took up residence in an abandoned zoo. “I lived in the house of the white elephant,” Kapralov claimed.

Kapralov found odd jobs as a dishwasher and busboy and loading vegetables at Hunts Point Market in the Bronx. On his days off, he and his friends would take the bus to 42nd Street to watch movies and improve their English. He also visited the then thriving Russian immigrant community on the Lower East Side to check out variety shows and

the Russian Free University on East Seventh Street, where Trotsky once lectured.

Kapralov reunited with his father when the elder Kapralov defected to the States and got a job teaching Russian at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. Kapralov went to high school there and later attended the Maryland Institute of Art in Baltimore, where he got by doing sketches of tourists and hookers outside the waterfront bars.

Drafted at the close of the Korean War, Kapralov served in the 101st Airborne Division, stationed in Fort Jackson, S.C., and went on missions to Korea and Laos. By then he was married with a daughter and a second child on the way. When he was discharged from the Army, he and his wife Ruth moved back to D.C. and opened a “bohemian, post-Beatnik” coffeehouse in Dupont Circle called The Unicorn.

He later moved with his second wife, Laura, to San Francisco, where he got a gig writing and drawing cartoons for the *Open City Press*, an early precursor to alternative weeklies. He also became moderately successful as a copywriter for ad agencies.

Kapralov landed on the Lower East Side in 1965, when he and his young family moved into a series of rundown walkups on East Seventh Street and East 11th Street, which Kapralov chronicles so vividly in *Once There Was a Village*. Of all the social histories that have been written about the East Village, *Once* is the only one to document the series of riots that rocked Avenue C in 1967, violent clashes that make the 1988 Tompkins Square riot look like a minor skirmish. When heroin hit hard in 1969, Kapralov wrote, “four to six people were mugged on our block EVERY SINGLE DAY.” The neighborhood was swimming in all sorts of drugs, and like the hippies around him Kapralov indulged plenty, landing himself in the psych ward from his own excesses. But Kapralov also wrote lovingly of his neighbors, particularly the “forgotten” Slavs, and the book features several of his delicate pen-and-ink sketches.

Kapralov combined his art with activism. In 1967 he was among the feuding factions of Young Lords, Black Panthers and white “revolutionaries” who occupied the Christodora House on Avenue B, before it became a luxury high-rise. He was also a founding member of Seven Loaves, the arts collective of seven neighborhood groups that, with CHARAS, took over the old P.S. 64 building on East Ninth Street and made it into a community center back in 1979. At CHARAS, Kapralov had a studio where he fashioned many of his abstract constructions from the guts of broken-down pianos, beads, wood and other found materials.

Kapralov founded his own homestead on East Sixth Street and ran a gallery called Sixth Sense in the ground-floor storefront

that would later become home to the housing advocacy group GOLES (Good Old Lower East Side). During the 1980s, Sixth Sense was the scene of many performances and raucous openings with collaborators like Spider Webb, the legendary tattoo artist. "I lost so much money, you wouldn't believe it," Kapralov laughed in an interview before his death. "[Mark] Kostabi wanted to buy all of my pen-and-inks and I refused because I thought he was a shit."

In 1988, his bloody, bald head was featured on the front cover of the *Village Voice* following the Tompkins Square riot. He got battered by the cops for singing "This Land Is Your Land" in the street.

Kapralov suffered greatly following the brutal rape and murder of his daughter Faith, an up-and-coming actress and folk singer who was living in Seattle — a shocking act from which he never really recovered.

But he remained a "warrior poet" and vibrant soul, and all those who got to know him were greatly enriched by his wisdom, and the glee that would peek out of his eyes when he got caught up in a good story or joke long enough to forget his sadness.

"He was my East Village art father," said jazz poet and artist Janet Restino, who stayed with Kapralov off and on during the 1980s when she was "bouncing around between sublets."

"He was a good friend who to me kind of encapsulated an old-world attitude toward art communities that I would have imagined existed in Paris during Picasso's time," said Restino. "Yuri was the East Village. He was a kind of an old-world king of the East Village."

Renegade homesteader David Boyle, who helped pioneer the East 13th Street squats, termed Kapralov "my Russian druid" and even cast him as a druid in his play *The Wisdom of the King*, which is enacted annually at the Sixth Street and Avenue B Community Garden.

"He was a poet, he was a mystic, he was adept at old law, he did all the things that a druid would do," explains Boyle. "He was a strong figure in the arts and he easily slipped into the role of being a grandfather figure."

In fact, Kapralov had three grandchildren and a great grandchild named Kayla.

For all his troubles, Kapralov seemed to live a charmed life. Lower East Side activist John Penley recalls the time Kapralov's dog Sharik got lost and was found by a couple of supermodels cruising the Lower East Side in their limousine. The women took the dog back to their Uptown digs and pampered him with manicures and sirloin steaks, until a friend noticed one of the signs that Kapralov had plastered all over the East Village seeking information about his beloved pet. "So the supermodels cruised back to the Lower East Side in their limo to return the dog, and Yuri ends up becoming friends with one of the models, who turned out to be part Russian," Penley laughed.

Though his health declined severely in later years as his drinking got worse, Kapralov continued making art until just weeks before his death. He also continued to charm

new arrivals to the Lower East Side like Barbara Monoian, who included several of Kapralov's wooden sculptures in a recent show at Musee de Monoian, the gallery she runs in her fourth-floor apartment on East Sixth Street. "In my opinion, he was hugely important. He was like an energy from this lost era moving around the neighborhood. He's one of the reasons I started this gallery," says Monoian, who hopes to compile an art book of Kapralov's works.

*Once There Was a Village* was reissued in 1998 by Akashic books ([www.akashicbooks.com](http://www.akashicbooks.com)), which also published Kapralov's novel about the Russian Civil War called *Devil's Midnight*. Kapralov also published many funny short stories and poems in the *East Village Eye* and *Downtown*, a former East Village community paper. His daughter Katya, who lives in Seattle, says she hopes to collect his writings and art works and display them at a memorial gathering sometime in October.

In a letter to *The Villager*, Katya Kapralov wrote: "Rich in spirit and through clever determination, my father lived a life of dreams. The reality of his dreams was his art and words which inspired hope for all the lost and found, including me."

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originally published in *The Villager*, vol. 75, no. 18, September 21 - 27, 2005



The set for Vit Horejs' "ethno-opera" about Lower East Side history loosely based on Yuri Kapralov's novel *Once There Was a Village*. Horejs worked in Kapralov's Sixth Sense gallery, and was part of the Seven Loaves coalition of arts groups involved in the El Bohio project at the old P.S. 64. (Photo by Yvonne Hespos)

# CHARAS

CHARAS / EL Bohio was a spin-off of the Real Great Society (an activist group of rehabilitated Puerto Rican gang leaders co-founded by Chino Garcia) that served as a focal point of community innovation, energy and growth.

The former school's high ceilings, large windows and noble exterior attracted artists and became a hub of creativity, as well as community organizing. "For over 22 years, the cultural center was a mecca for the arts and community service, providing very low cost free art, rehearsal, performance and community space, workshops, training's, and after school programs."

In its early years Charas worked with engineer/futurist R. Buckminster Fuller to adapt geodesic domes to the needs of poor communities. The main aim was to teach the local inhabitants alternative lifestyles and methods of housing. It was mostly a technically oriented endeavor and it became instantly recognizable by the numerous geodesic domes that it put up in vacant lots.

Epicenter of the grassroots, community revival movement, the old P.S. 64 wasn't just a city landmark, but a national landmark, since it was from places like the Lower East Side and the South Bronx, that the neighborhood revitalization movement spread across the country. "Founded in 1977, a pair of community-based and Latino led organizations, Adopt-A-Building and CHARAS, the building was transformed into a community center known as El Bohio after the city abandoned it in the late 1970s... The grass-roots initiative mirrored a local and nationwide citizen-led rebirth of urban centers and helped to catalyze the revitalization of the surrounding Loisaida."

The term 'Loisaida' was coined by play-writer / activist Bimbo Rivas as a Beyond referring to a particular urban place, to say Loisaida (as opposed to Ambulante, one of the diverse organizations housed at Charas/El Bohio. streets.

After the Tompkin Square Park riots of the 80's El Bohio also became a public auction to condo developer Gregg Singer despite widespread com

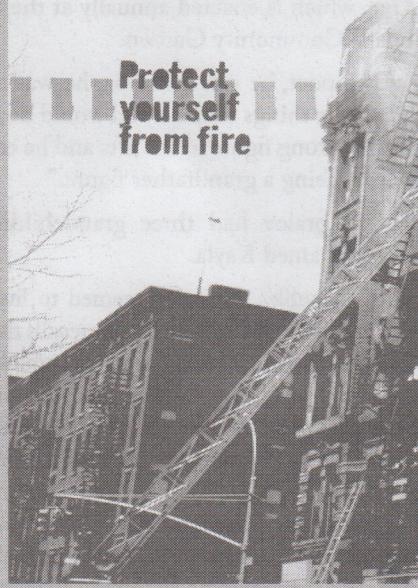


## 2014 :UPDATE

**Community Board 3 is calling on DeBlasio's adm to "return the former P.S. 64 school building to the community by legally retrieving and giving it back to CHARAS /El Bohio amongst other other organizations with a history of serving the LES."**

# Loisaid

Protect  
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from fire



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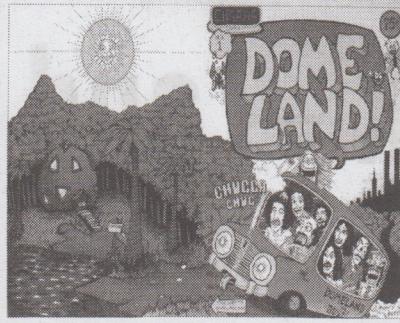
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vist Bimbo Rivas as a discursive space for Puerto Ricans and the multi-cultural coalition born from the political relationship to the Lower East Side neighborhood. Loisaida (as opposed to Alphabet City or the East Village) communicated action and the values of working-class autonomy and self-help. Rivas was founder of El Teatro at Charas/El Bohio. During those early days Bimbo and Chino would promote the Loisaida concept of place and identity by performing skits of their plays on the

Bohio also became associated with many shows and events from the Anglo and Latino Punk community. In 1998 the Giuliani Administration sold the community center at

pite widespread community and political opposition. Charas was evicted in 2001 and after much legal wrangling the evictor did not succeed in turning the building into a 19 story dormitory for students. Yet, the century-old school building on East 9th Street, once a vital part of the city's social history for the last decade became better known for just being empty.

In 2006 the Landmarks Preservation Commission voted unanimously to landmark the old P.S. 64.

The panel recognized CHARAS for its role both in rescuing the building from the waves of arson and disinvestment that plagued the Lower East Side during the 1970s and early '80s, and for serving as a "physical and symbolic center" of New York's urban homesteading movement. Commissioner Roberta Brandes Gratz said the vote to designate P.S. 64 was one of the commission's "most significant decisions," because it marked the first time the LPC was recognizing the role of grassroots groups who used "self help" and "sweat equity" to preserve buildings in the face of municipal neglect.

In an update to the saga, Singer has a new asking price of \$40 million. This is a slight increase over the \$3.15 million that Giuliani handed it to him for- and is ironically looking for a nonprofit theater company to take the basement theater space in order to qualify for tax benefits!

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THE QUALITY  
OF LIFE IN

IN SPACESHIP EARTH

Text & Archival Research: Libertad Guerra

# Looking Back – and Forth

By Alan W. Moore

ABC No Rio Dinero is in large measure a conventional victory story. A militant polemic and direct action are rewarded with an accommodation by power, then the fun begins. In truth, ABC No Rio was an accident, an infamous fortuity born of a combination of autonomous artistic enterprise and the political calculations of municipal administration. It is certainly a classic American instance of the dynamic of resistance and negotiation which marks the evolution of left social centers in Europe, as described by the analysts of Universidad Nómada. [Note 1]

ABC was a project emanating from a group of New York artists who by 1979 were already being called “punks” in the press. The group was Colab (aka Collaborative Projects), specialists in “guerrilla art exhibitions,” i.e., shows in non-commercial, non-institutional venues.

Some in our crowd were much given to conspiracy theories, and dark intimations about the Machiavellian motions of power. Reports of the Trilateral Commission were standard references. My own conspiracy theory about the “accident” of ABC is that when Joseph Beuys visited our exhibition during the street demonstration phase, [2] it became clear to the city government – (it was mayor Edward Koch’s, a gay-friendly Greenwich Village pol, and very savvy about the uses of culture) – that the potential for an aggressive, internationally networked cultural political movement in New York City was present. Beuys had already been a catalyst in the formation of the German Green party, which, unlike the U.S. Greens has substantial electoral support. Throughout the 1970s he had propagandized a nomadic Free International University, and helped to establish several branches. The U.S. tour of the most famous politicized artist in the world was closely attended and much discussed.

These facts being known, then, clearly it would be only political common sense to make an immediate accommodation with those who were stepping militantly in this direction, [3] that is, in the time-honored manner of NYC politics, to buy off the activists with city jobs. Before they had the notion to link up with German Autonomes, Dutch Kraak erb, etc...

That’s my explanation of a move by the city administration that has always puzzled me. We were rather abruptly given the opportunity to do what we only said we wanted to – to run a gallery, a salon of expositions, a proto-social center in vacant city-owned property.

Of course it was too much work! As artists, we were flighty creatures (i.e., really concerned primarily with our art, not administration), and quickly became exhausted by the many demands of running the space. So we handed it off to another bunch, the Pool collective of dancers, performers, and artists.

This turns out to have been a key decision... Many other Lower East Side cultural institutions are deeply reliant upon single committed individuals for their long-term survival. With the handover, a tradition of collective administration was established, a bureaucratic ethic which has continuously informed ABC.

The leaders of the Pool group persevered in the face of right-wing culture war funding cuts, and waged an unceasing campaign against eviction. While the city higher-ups had ceded ABC use of the building, the agency responsible remained reflexively resolute in their intention to evict and move the building towards sale into private hands. Only a meticulous dossier of the city’s mishandled responsibilities – their cumulative illegal doings – forestalled the municipal lawyers from succeeding with eviction.

The next administration after Pool’s was a collective of anarchist punk rockers who had been booking matinee shows for young people into the space for years. In the later 1980s and into the ‘90s, ABC in a sense fulfilled its destiny – the place became an organizing center for the Lower East Side squatting movement. [4] This movement militantly resisted the city-abetted gentrification of the East Village. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s police pulled out nearly all the stops – short of shooting people. They stormed occupied houses and sent a tank into the streets. Beatings of activists were common. [5]

All this was of a piece with a nascent international movement. Militant urban squatting initiatives had arisen and cohered in Berlin, Amsterdam, London and many other cities besides New York. [6] ABC was a center, and a significant node for organizing this movement. This is why, at one point when the city moved (again) to evict ABC, demonstrators appeared at the door of the U.S. embassy in Prague.

Finally, at the height of this struggle, the city again made a deal. Only a quiescent resistance could set the stage for the next phase of hyper-gentrification, so the squeaky wheel of the Lower East Side got greased. Many of the

remaining squatters gained their buildings as cooperative housing. ABC was given control of the 156 Rivington Street building, and began the long process of renovating it as a community cultural facility. [7]

In the last few years, ABC has entered into an extended phase of fundraising, an exhausting process. Still, the place has evolved into an international style left social center in the era after state socialism. ABC includes producing collectives in silkscreening and photography and a library of radical culture journals and zines. ABC has hosted Books Through Bars, Food Not Bombs and Critical Mass, the viral international projects in information, food, and cycling respectively. ABC was an organizing and convergence center for the large demonstrations that marked the global justice movement of the early 2000s. All this while maintaining a full public program of art, music and poetry.

ABC No Rio today is both an outcome and a promise. It is the result of a fecund moment when cultural and social modes of being mingled, when art could make a new political space even as older visions of social justice died. In 1980 ABC was a candle flickering just beyond the walls. Today it is one of many bonfires burning brightly, signals of an age we have yet to know.

– Madrid, August 2008

*This is the afterword to the ABC No Rio catalogue excerpts posted online at: 98bowery.com*

#### NOTES

1 – See the May, 2008 issue of the online zine transform.eipcp.net, "Monster Institutions" edited by Universidad Nómada.

2 – Beuys came during his U.S. lecture tour, brought to the site by the art dealer Ronald Feldman, and also likely informed by John Halpern who was making a film of Beuys and had launched a similar abortive artist occupation some weeks earlier.

3 – The other most obvious consideration for city officials was that the site of the occupation on Delancey Street was a property which had been condemned for Robert Moses' crosstown expressway project. This was never built, the properties remained vacant, and the political wounds of this disaster continued to fester in 1979.

4 – The best recent texts on this movement are in the anthology Clayton Patterson, et al. eds., *Resistance: A Radical Social and Political History of the Lower East Side* (Seven Stories Press, NY, 2007). Seth Tobocman's *War in the Neighborhood* (Autonomedia, NY, 1999) is a rich, militant, thoughtful graphic novel by a leading artist of the squatter movement.

5 – More lawsuits for police brutality were settled with cash payments than activists convicted of any crimes. Like many big cities, New York police beat, shoot and intern first, and answer questions in court later.

6 – Most of this information is scattered online. The group SqEK (Squatting Europe Kollective) has recently published *Squatting in Europe: Radical Spaces, Urban Struggles* (Minor Compositions/Autonomedia, 2013), and more are coming fast.

7 – The film *156 Rivington*, by Andrea Meller (Greenhouse Pictures, 2002) tells this story.



Design for reconstruction of ABC No Rio as a green building, by Paul Castrucci Architect

**"THE MISSING PIECE IS YOURS!"**  
This graphic from a recent building fund appeal for ABC No Rio remains true. After a decade of fund-raising, the place remains agonizingly short of the money needed to build amidst NYC's ever-rising construction costs. Please help if you can...

# The Real Estate Show

Manifesto or Statement of Intent

Committee for the Real Estate Show, 1980

*Printed and distributed to exhibiting artists at planning meetings for the Real Estate Show*

The occupation and exposition imposes a complex human system where previously there was no system -- or only the system of waste and disuse that characterizes the profit system in real estate. It is to create a showcase for desires, to reassert the primacy of human effort, to encourage the resistance of commercial initiatives, to allot extra portion to the increment of human fantasy that lives in all people, however much they may have been reduced to markets, ethnic power blocs, or "problems" of one kind or another. For artists, it is a question of getting out of police. There are so many "representatively structured" spaces for exhibitions. The policies of these headmasters, these backstraddlers in pinstripe, are not in tune with the aims and ideals of artists. This is a field test of a collective working situation -- putting the collaborative process to the test of the initial set-up, and a pressure test of solidarity in terms of a pre-emptive extralegal action taken together.

## **INVADE, RESTRUCTURE, AND ADMIRE RESPECT FOR THE PEOPLE AND THEIR PLACE "RESPECT" THE WINTER PALACE**

This is a short-term occupation of vacant city-managed property.

The action is extralegal -- it illuminates no legal issues, calls for no "rights." It is pre-emptive and insurrectionary.

The action is dedicated to Elizabeth Mangum, a middle-aged Black American killed by police and marshals as she resisted eviction in Flatbush last year.

The intention of this action is to show that artists are willing and able to place themselves and their work squarely in a context which shows solidarity with oppressed people, a recognition that mercantile and institutional structures oppress and distort artists' lives and works, and a recognition that artists, living and working in depressed communities, are compradors in the revaluation of property and the "whitening" of neighborhoods.

It is important to focus attention on the way artists get used as pawns by greedy white developers.

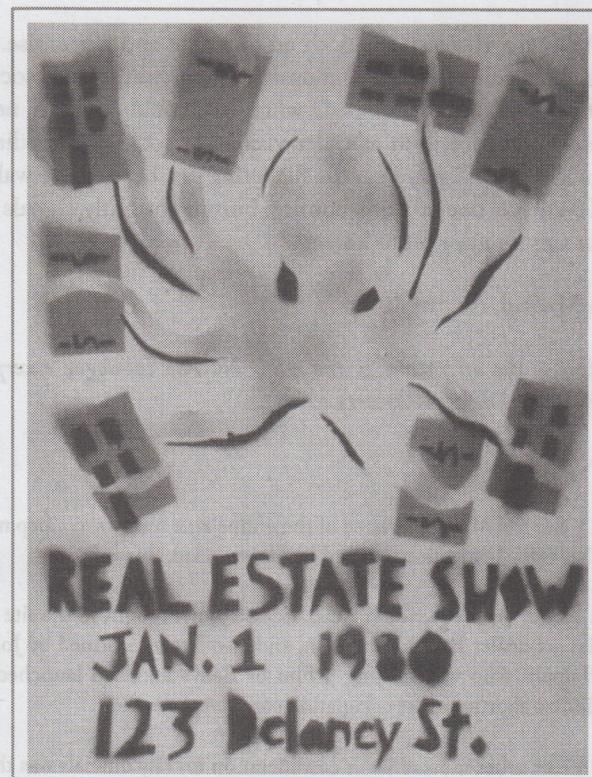
It is important for artists to express solidarity with Third World and oppressed people.

It is important to show that people are not helpless -- they can express their resentment with things-as-they-are in a way that is constructive, exemplary, and interesting.

It is important to try to bridge the gap between artists and working people by putting artwork on a boulevard level.

It is important to do something dramatic that is neither commercially oriented nor institutionally quarantined -- a groundswell of human action and participation with each other that points up currents of feeling that are neither for sale nor for morticing into the shape of an institution.

It is important to do something that people (particularly in the art community) cannot immediately identify unless they question themselves and examine their own actions for an answer.



**It is important to have fun**

**It is important to learn**

posted at: [http://www.abcnorio.org/about/history/res\\_manifesto.html](http://www.abcnorio.org/about/history/res_manifesto.html)